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31st ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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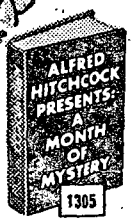

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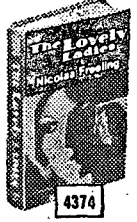

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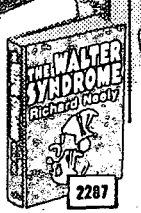

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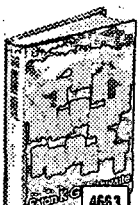

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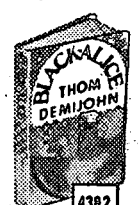

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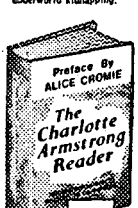

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Surgery changes ugly woman into siren but leads to her mysterious death.

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a *SHORT NOVEL* about *HERCULE POIROT* by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

The secret plans on which the security of the Empire might depend were on the desk in Lord Mayfield's study. It did not seem possible that anyone could have stolen them. Yet the plans were gone—vanished in thin air.

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THE INCREDIBLE THEFT

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

As the butler handed round the soufflé, Lord Mayfield leaned confidentially toward his neighbor on the right, Lady Julia Carrington. Known as a perfect host, Lord Mayfield took trouble to live up to his reputation. Although unmarried, he was always charming to women.

Lady Julia Carrington was a woman of 40, tall, dark, and vivacious. She was very thin, but still beautiful. Her hands and feet in particular were exquisite. Her manner was abrupt and restless, that of a woman who lived on her nerves.

About opposite to her at the round table sat her husband, Air Marshal Sir George Carrington. His career had begun in the Navy, and he still retained the bluff breeziness of the ex-Naval man. He was laughing, and chaffing the beautiful Mrs. Vanderlyn, who was sitting on the other side of her host.

Mrs. Vanderlyn was an extremely good-looking blonde. Her voice held a soupçon of American accent, just enough to be pleasant without undue exaggeration.

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On the other side of Sir George Carrington sat Mrs. Macatta, M.P. Mrs. Macatta was a great authority on Housing and Infant Welfare. She barked out short sentences rather than spoke them, and was generally of somewhat alarming aspect. It was perhaps natural that the Air Marshal would find his right-hand neighbor the pleasanter to talk to.

Mrs. Macatta, who always talked shop wherever she was, barked out short spates of information on her special subjects to her left-hand neighbor, young Reggie Carrington.

Reggie Carrington was 21, and completely uninterested in Housing, Infant Welfare, and indeed any political subject. He said at intervals, "How frightful!" and "I absolutely agree with you," and his mind was clearly elsewhere.

Mr. Carlile, Lord Mayfield's private secretary, sat between young Reggie and his mother. A pale young man with pince-nez and an air of intelligent reserve, he talked little, but was always ready to fling himself into any conversational breach. Noticing that Reggie Carrington was struggling with a yawn, he leaned forward and adroitly asked Mrs. Macatta a question about her "Fitness for Children" scheme.

Round the table, moving silently in the subdued amber light, a butler and two footmen offered dishes and filled wine glasses. Lord Mayfield paid a very high salary to his chef, and was noted as a connoisseur of wines.

The table was a round one, but there was no mistaking who was the host. Where Lord Mayfield sat was so very decidedly the head of the table. A big man, square-shouldered, with thick silvery hair, a big straight nose, and a slightly prominent chin. It was a face that lent itself easily to caricature. As Sir Charles McLaughlin, Lord Mayfield had combined a political career with being the head of a big engineering firm. He was himself a first-class engineer. His peerage had come a year before, and at the same time he had been created first Minister of Armaments, a new ministry which had only just come into being.

The dessert had been placed on the table. The port had circulated once. Catching Mrs. Vanderlyn's eye, Lady Julia rose. The three women left the room.

The port passed round once more, and Lord Mayfield referred lightly to pheasants. The conversation for five minutes or so was sporting. Then Sir George said, "Expect

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you'd like to join the others in the drawing room, Reggie, my boy. Lord Mayfield won't mind."

The boy took the hint easily enough.

"Thanks, Lord Mayfield, I think I will."

Mr. Carlile murmured, "If you'll excuse me, Lord Mayfield—certain memoranda and other work to get through—"

Lord Mayfield nodded. The two young men left the room. The servants had retired some time before. The Minister for Armaments and the head of the Air Force were alone.

After a minute or two, Carrington said, "Okay?"

"Absolutely! There's nothing to touch this new bomber in any country in Europe."

"Make rings round 'em, eh? That's what I thought."

"Supremacy of the air," said Lord Mayfield decisively.

Sir George Carrington gave a deep sigh.

"About time! You know, Charles, we've been through a ticklish spell. Lots of gunpowder everywhere all over Europe. And we weren't ready, damn it! We've had a narrow squeak. And we're not out of the woods yet, however much we hurry on construction."

Lord Mayfield murmured, "Nevertheless, George, there are some advantages in starting late. A lot of the European stuff is out of date already—and they're perilously near bankruptcy."

"I don't believe that means anything," said Sir George gloomily. "One's always hearing this nation and that is bankrupt. But they carry on just the same. You know, finance is an absolute mystery to me."

Lord Mayfield's eyes twinkled a little. Sir George Carrington was always so very much the old-fashioned "bluff, honest old sea dog." There were people who said that it was a pose he deliberately adopted.

Changing the subject, Carrington said in a slightly over-casual manner, "Attractive woman, Mrs. Vanderlyn, eh?"

Lord Mayfield said, "Are you wondering what she's doing here?"

His eyes were amused.

Carrington looked a little confused.

"Not at all—not at all."

"Oh, yes, you were. Don't be an old humbug, George. You were wondering, in a slightly dismayed fashion, whether I was the latest victim."

Carrington said slowly, "I'll admit that it *did* seem a trifle odd to me that she should be here—well, this particular weekend."

Lord Mayfield nodded. "Where the carcass is, there are the vultures gathered together.

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We've got a very definite carcass, and Mrs. Vanderlyn might be described as Vulture Number One."

The Air Marshal said abruptly, "Know anything about this Vanderlyn woman?"

Lord Mayfield clipped off the end of a cigar, lit it with precision and, throwing his head back, dropped out his words with careful deliberation.

"What do I know about Mrs. Vanderlyn? I know that she's an American citizen. I know that she's had three husbands, one Italian, one German, and one Russian, and that in consequence she has made useful contacts in three countries. I know that she manages to buy very expensive clothes and live in a very luxurious manner, and that there is some uncertainty as to where the income comes from which permits her to do so."

With a grin, Sir George Carrington murmured, "Your spies have not been inactive, Charles."

"I know," Lord Mayfield continued, "that in addition to having a seductive type of beauty, Mrs. Vanderlyn is also a very good listener, and that she can display a fascinating interest in what we call 'shop.' That is to say, a man can tell her all about his job and feel that he is being intensely interesting to the lady. Sundry young officers have gone a little too far in their zeal to be interesting, and their careers have suffered in consequence. They have told Mrs. Vanderlyn a little more than they should have done. Nearly all the lady's friends are in the Services—but last winter she was hunting in a certain county near one of our largest armament firms, and she formed various friendships not at all sporting in character. To put it briefly, Mrs. Vanderlyn is a very useful person to—" He described a circle in the air with his cigar. "Perhaps we had better not say to whom. We will just say to a European power—and perhaps to more than one European power."

Carrington drew a deep breath. "You take a great load off my mind, Charles."

"You thought I had fallen for the siren? My dear George! Mrs. Vanderlyn is just a little too obvious in her methods for a wary old bird like me. Besides, she is, as they say, not quite so young as she once was. Your young squadron leaders wouldn't notice that. But I am fifty-six, my boy. In another four years I shall probably be a nasty old man continually haunting the society of unwilling debutantes."

"I was a fool," said Carrington apologetically, "but

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it seemed a bit odd—"

"It seemed to you odd that she should be here, in a somewhat intimate party just at the moment when you and I were to hold an unofficial conference over a discovery that will probably revolutionize the whole problem of air defense?"

Sir George Carrington nodded.

Lord Mayfield said, smiling, "That's exactly it. That's the bait."

"The bait?"

"You see, George, to use the language of the movies, we've nothing actually 'on' the woman. And we want something. She's got away with rather more than she should in the past. But she's been careful—damnably careful. *We* know what she's been up to, but we've got no definite proof of it. We've got to tempt her with something big."

"Something big being the specifications of the new bomber?"

"Exactly. It's got to be something big enough to induce her to take a risk—to come out into the open. And then—*we've got her!*"

Sir George grunted. "Oh, well," he said. "I daresay it's all right. But suppose she won't take the risk?"

"That would be a pity," said Lord Mayfield. Then he added, "But I think she will . . ."

He rose.

"Shall we join the ladies in the drawing room? We mustn't deprive your wife of her bridge."

Sir George grunted. "Julia's a damned sight too fond of her bridge. Drops a packet over it. She can't afford to play as high as she does, and I've told her so. The trouble is, Julia's a born gambler."

Coming round the table to join his host he said, "Well, I hope your plan comes off, Charles."

In the drawing room conversation had flagged more than once. Mrs. Vanderlyn was usually at a disadvantage when left alone with members of her own sex. That charming sympathetic manner of hers, so much appreciated by members of the male sex, did not for some reason or other commend itself to women. Lady Julia was a woman whose manners were either very good or very bad. On this occasion she disliked Mrs. Vanderlyn and was bored by Mrs. Macatta, and she made no secret of her feelings. Conversation languished, and might have ceased altogether but for the latter.

Mrs. Macatta was a woman of great earnestness of purpose.

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Mrs. Vanderlyn she dismissed immediately as a useless and parasitic type. Lady Julia she tried to interest in a forthcoming charity entertainment which she was organizing. Lady Julia answered vaguely, stifled a yawn or two, and retired into her own inner preoccupation. Why didn't Charles and George come? How tiresome men were. Her comments became even more perfunctory as she became absorbed in her own thoughts and worries.

The three women were sitting in silence when the men finally entered the room.

Lord Mayfield thought to himself: "Julia looks ill tonight. What a mass of nerves the woman is."

Aloud he said, "What about a rubber—eh?"

Lady Julia brightened at once. Bridge was as the breath of life to her.

Reggie Carrington entered the room at that minute, and a foursome was arranged. Lady Julia, Mrs. Vanderlyn, Sir George, and young Reggie sat down to the card table. Lord Mayfield devoted himself to the task of entertaining Mrs. Macatta.

When two rubbers had been played, Sir George looked ostentatiously at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Hardly worth while beginning another," he remarked.

His wife looked annoyed. "It's only a quarter to eleven. A short one."

"They never are, my dear," said Sir George good-temperedly. "Anyway, Charles and I have some work to do."

Mrs. Vanderlyn murmured, "How important that sounds! I suppose you clever men who are at the top of things never get a real rest."

"No forty-hour week for us," said Sir George.

Mrs. Vanderlyn murmured, "You know, I feel rather ashamed of myself as a raw American, but I do get so *thrilled* at meeting people who control the destinies of a country. I expect that seems a very crude point of view to you, Sir George."

"My dear Mrs. Vanderlyn, I should never think of you as 'crude' or 'raw.' "

He smiled into her eyes. There was, perhaps, a hint of irony in the voice which she did not miss. Adroitly she turned to Reggie, smiling sweetly into his eyes.

"I'm sorry we're not continuing our partnership. That was a frightfully clever four no-trump call of yours."

Flushed and pleased, Reggie mumbled, "Bit of a fluke that the slam came off."

"Oh, no, it was really a

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clever bit of deduction on your part. You'd deduced from the bidding exactly where the cards must be, and you played accordingly. I thought it was brilliant."

Lady Julia rose abruptly.

"The woman lays it on with a palette knife," she thought disgustedly.

Then her eyes softened as they rested on her son. He believed it all. How pathetically young and pleased he looked. How incredibly naive he was. No wonder he got into scrapes. He was too trusting. The truth of it was he had too sweet a nature. George didn't understand him in the least. Men were so unsympathetic in their judgments. They forgot that they had ever been young themselves. George was much too harsh with Reggie.

Mrs. Macatta had risen. Good-nights were said.

The three women went out of the room. Lord Mayfield helped himself to a drink, after giving one to Sir George, then he looked up as Mr. Carlile appeared at the door.

"Get out the files and all the papers, will you, Carlile? Including the plans and the prints. The Air Marshal and I will be along shortly. We'll just take a turn outside first, eh, George? It's stopped raining."

Mr. Carlile, turning to depart, murmured an apology as he almost collided with Mrs. Vanderlyn.

She drifted toward them, murmuring, "My book. I was reading it before dinner."

Reggie sprang forward and held up a book.

"Is this it? On the sofa?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you *so* much."

She smiled sweetly, said good night again, and went out of the room.

Sir George had opened one of the French windows. "Beautiful night now," he announced. "Good idea of yours to take a turn."

Reggie said, "Well, good night, sir. I'll be toddling off to bed."

"Good night, my boy," said Lord Mayfield.

Reggie picked up a detective story which he had begun earlier in the evening and left the room.

Lord Mayfield and Sir George stepped out to the terrace.

It was now a beautiful night, with a clear sky studded with stars.

Sir George drew a deep breath. "Phew, that woman uses a lot of scent," he remarked.

Lord Mayfield laughed. "Anyway, it's not cheap scent. One of the most expensive

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brands in the market, I should say."

Sir George gave a grimace. "I suppose one should be thankful for that."

"You should, indeed. I think a woman smothered in cheap scent is one of the greatest abominations known to mankind."

Sir George glanced up at the sky. "Extraordinary the way it's cleared. I heard the rain beating down when we were at dinner."

The two men strolled along the terrace.

The terrace ran the whole length of the house. Below it the ground sloped gently away, permitting a magnificent view over the Sussex weald.

Sir George lit a cigar.

"About this metal alloy—" he began.

The talk became technical.

As they approached the far end of the terrace for the fifth time, Lord Mayfield said with a sigh, "Oh, well, I suppose we'd better get down to it."

"Yes, good bit of work to get through."

The two men turned, and Lord Mayfield uttered a surprised exclamation.

"Hallo! See that?"

"See what?"

"Thought I saw someone slip across the terrace from my study window."

"Nonsense, old boy. I didn't see anything."

"Well, I did—or I thought I did."

"Your eyes are playing tricks on you. I was looking straight down the terrace, and I'd have seen anything there was to be seen. There's precious little *I* don't see—even if I do have to hold a newspaper at arm's length."

Lord Mayfield chuckled. "I can put one over on you there, George. I read easily without glasses."

"But you can't always distinguish the fellow on the other side of the House. Or is that eyeglass of yours sheer intimidation?"

Laughing, the two men entered Lord Mayfield's study, the French window of which was open.

Mr. Carlile was busy arranging some papers in a file by the safe.

He looked up as they entered.

"Ha, Carlile, everything ready?"

"Yes, Lord Mayfield, all the papers are on your desk."

The desk in question was a big important-looking writing table of mahogany set across a corner by the window. Lord Mayfield went over to it and began sorting through the various documents laid out.

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"Lovely night now," said Sir George.

Mr. Carlile agreed. "Yes, indeed. Remarkable the way it's cleared up after the rain."

Putting away his file, Mr. Carlile asked, "Will you want me any more tonight, Lord Mayfield?"

"No, I don't think so, Carlile. I'll put all these away myself. We shall probably be late. You'd better turn in."

"Thank you. Good night, Lord Mayfield. Good night, Sir George."

"Good night, Carlile."

As the secretary was about to leave the room, Lord Mayfield said sharply, "Just a minute, Carlile. You've forgotten the most important of the lot."

"I beg your pardon, Lord Mayfield."

"The actual plans of the bomber, man."

The secretary stared. "They're right on the top, sir."

"They're nothing of the sort."

"But I just put them there."

"Look for yourself, man."

With a bewildered expression the young man came forward and joined Lord Mayfield.

Somewhat impatiently the Minister indicated the pile of papers. Carlile sorted through them, his expression of bewilderment growing.

"You see, they're not there."

The secretary stammered, "But—but it's incredible. I laid them there not three minutes ago."

Lord Mayfield said good-humoredly, "You must have made a mistake. They must be still in the safe."

"I don't see how—I *know* I put them there!"

Lord Mayfield brushed past him to the open safe. Sir George joined them. A very few minutes sufficed to show that the plans were not there.

Dazed and unbelieving, the three men returned to the desk and once more turned over the papers.

"My God," said Mayfield. "They're gone, really gone!"

Mr. Carlile cried, "But it's impossible!"

"Who's been in this room?" snapped out the minister.

"No one. No one at all."

"Look here, Carlile, those plans haven't just vanished into thin air. Someone has taken them. Has Mrs. Vanderlyn been in here?"

"Mrs. Vanderlyn? Oh, no, sir."

"I'll back that," said Carrington. He sniffed the air. "That scent of hers."

"Nobody has been in here," insisted Carlile. "I simply can't understand it."

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"Look here, Carlile," said Lord Mayfield. "Pull yourself together. We've got to get to the bottom of this. You're absolutely *sure* the plans were in the safe?"

"Absolutely."

"You actually saw them? You didn't just assume they were among the others?"

"No, no, Lord Mayfield, I saw them. I put them on top of the others on the desk."

"And since then, you say, nobody has been in the room. Have you been *out* of the room?"

"No—at least—yes."

"Ah," cried Sir George. "Now we're getting at it!"

Lord Mayfield said sharply, "What on earth—"

Carlile interrupted. "In the normal course of events, Lord Mayfield, I should not, of course, have dreamed of leaving the room when important papers were lying about, but hearing a woman scream—"

"A woman scream?" said Lord Mayfield in a surprised voice.

"Yes, Lord Mayfield. It startled me more than I can say. I was just putting the papers on the desk when I heard it, and naturally I ran out into the hall."

"Who screamed?"

"Mrs. Vanderlyn's French maid. She was standing halfway up the stairs, looking very white and upset and shaking all over. She said she had seen a ghost."

"Seen a ghost?"

"Yes, a tall woman dressed all in white who moved without a sound and floated in the air."

"What a ridiculous story!"

"Yes, Lord Mayfield, that is what I told her. I must say she seemed rather ashamed of herself. She went off upstairs and I came back in here."

"How long ago was this?"

"Just a minute or two before you and Sir George came in."

"And you were out of the room—how long?"

The secretary considered. "Two minutes—at the most three."

"Long enough," groaned Lord Mayfield. Suddenly he clutched his friend's arm. "George, that shadow I saw—slinking away from this window. That was it! As soon as Carlile left the room, he nipped in, seized the plans, and made off."

"Dirty work," said Sir George. Then he seized his friend by the arm. "Look here, Charles, this is the devil of a business. What the hell are we going to do about it?"

"At any rate give it a trial, Charles."

It was half an hour later. The two men were in Lord

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Mayfield's study, and Sir George had been expending a considerable amount of persuasion to induce his friend to adopt a certain course.

Lord Mayfield, at first most unwilling, was gradually becoming less averse to the idea.

Sir George went on, "Don't be so damned pig-headed, Charles."

Lord Mayfield said slowly, "Why drag in a wretched foreigner we know nothing about?"

"But I happen to know a lot about him. The man's a marvel."

"Humph."

"Look here, Charles. It's a chance! Discretion is the essence of this business. If it leaks out—"

"*When* it leaks out is what you mean!"

"Not necessarily. This man, Hercule Poirot—"

"Will come down here and produce the plans like a conjurer taking rabbits out of his hat, I suppose?"

"He'll get at the truth. And the truth is what we want. Look here, Charles, I take all responsibility on myself."

Lord Mayfield said slowly, "Oh, well, have it your own way, but I don't see what the fellow can do."

Sir George picked up the phone. "I'm going to get through to him—now."

"He'll be in bed."

"He can get up. Dash it all, Charles, you can't let that woman get away with it."

"Mrs. Vanderlyn, you mean?"

"Yes. You don't doubt, do you, that she's at the bottom of this?"

"No, I don't. She's turned the tables on me with a vengeance. I don't like admitting, George, that a woman's been too clever for us. It goes against the grain. But it's true. We won't be able to prove anything against her, and yet we both know that she's been the prime mover in the affair."

"Women are the devil," said Carrington with feeling.

"Nothing to connect her with it, damn it all! We may believe that she put the girl up to that screaming trick, and that the man lurking outside was her accomplice, but the devil of it is we can't prove it."

"Perhaps Hercule Poirot can."

Suddenly Lord Mayfield laughed. "By the Lord, George, I thought you were too much of an old John Bull to put your trust in a Frenchman, however clever."

"He's not even a Frenchman, he's a Belgian," said Sir George in a rather shamefaced manner.

"Well, have your Belgian

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down. Let him try his wits on this business. I'll bet he can't make more of it than we can."

Without replying, Sir George stretched a hand to the telephone.

Blinking a little, Hercule Poirot turned his head from one man to the other. Very delicately he smothered a yawn.

It was half-past two in the morning. He had been roused from sleep and rushed down through the darkness in a big Rolls-Royce. Now he had just finished hearing what the two men had to tell him.

"Those are the facts, M. Poirot," said Lord Mayfield.

He leaned back in his chair and slowly fixed his monocle in one eye. Through it a shrewd, pale-blue eye watched Poirot attentively. Besides being shrewd, the eye was definitely skeptical. Poirot cast a swift glance at Sir George Carrington.

That gentleman was leaning forward with an expression of almost childlike hopefulness on his face.

Poirot said slowly, "I have the facts, yes. The maid screams, the secretary goes out, the nameless watcher comes in, the plans are there on top of the desk, he snatches them up and goes. The facts—they are all very convenient."

Something in the way he uttered the last phrase seemed to attract Lord Mayfield's attention. He sat up a little straighter, and his monocle dropped. It was as though a new alertness came to him.

"I beg your pardon, M. Poirot?"

"I said, Lord Mayfield, that the facts were all very convenient—for the thief. By the way, you are sure it was a *man* you saw?"

Lord Mayfield shook his head. "That I couldn't say. It was just a—shadow. In fact, I was almost doubtful if I had seen anyone."

Poirot transferred his gaze to the air marshal.

"And you, Sir George? Could you say if it was a man or a woman?"

"I didn't see anyone."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Then he skipped suddenly to his feet and went over to the writing table.

"I can assure you that the plans are not there," said Lord Mayfield. "We have all three been through those papers half a dozen times."

"All three? You mean, your secretary also?"

"Yes, Carlile."

Poirot turned suddenly. "Tell me, Lord Mayfield, which paper was on top when you went over to the desk?"

Mayfield frowned a little in

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the effort of remembrance.

"Let me see—yes, it was a rough memorandum of some of our air-defense positions."

Deftly Poirot nipped out a paper and brought it over. "Is this the one, Lord Mayfield?"

Lord Mayfield took it and glanced over it.

"Yes, that's the one."

Poirot took it over to Carrington.

"Did you notice this paper on the desk?"

Sir George took it, held it away from him, then slipped on his pince-nez.

"Yes, that's right. I looked through them too, with Carlile and Mayfield. This one was on top."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. He replaced the paper on the desk. Mayfield looked at him in a slightly puzzled manner.

"If there are any other questions—" Lord Mayfield began.

"But yes, certainly there is a question. Carlile. Carlile is the question!"

Lord Mayfield's color rose a little.

"Carlile, M. Poirot, is quite above suspicion! He has been my confidential secretary for nine years. He has access to all my private papers, and I may point out to you that he could have made a copy of the plans and a tracing of the specifications quite easily without anyone being the wiser."

"I appreciate your point," said Poirot. "If he had been guilty there would be no need for him to stage a clumsy robbery."

"In any case," said Lord Mayfield, "I am sure of Carlile. I will guarantee him."

"Carlile," said Carrington gruffly, "is all right."

Poirot spread out his hands gracefully.

"And this Mrs. Vanderlyn—she is all wrong?"

"She's a wrong 'un all right," said Sir George.

Lord Mayfield said in more measured tones, "I think, M. Poirot, that there can be no doubt of Mrs. Vanderlyn's—well—activities. The Foreign Office can give you more precise data as to that."

"And the maid, you take it, is in league with her mistress?"

"No doubt of it," said Sir George.

"It seems to me a plausible assumption," said Lord Mayfield more cautiously.

There was a pause. Poirot sighed, and absent-mindedly rearranged one or two articles on a table at his right hand. Then he said, "I take it that these papers represented money? That is, the stolen papers would be definitely worth a large sum in cash."

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"If presented in a certain quarter—yes."

"Such as?"

Sir George mentioned the names of two European powers.

Poirot nodded. "That fact would be known to anyone, I take it?"

"Mrs. Vanderlyn would know it all right."

"I said to *anyone?*"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Anyone with a minimum of intelligence would appreciate the cash value of the plans?"

"Yes, but M. Poirot—" Lord Mayfield was looking rather uncomfortable.

Poirot held up a hand. "I do what you call explore all the avenues."

Suddenly he rose again, stepped nimbly out of the French window and with a flashlight examined the edge of the grass at the farther side of the terrace.

The two men watched him.

He came in again, sat down, and said, "Tell me, Lord Mayfield, this skulker in the shadows, you do not have him pursued?"

Lord Mayfield shrugged. "At the bottom of the garden he could make his way out to a main road. If he had a car waiting there, he would soon be out of reach."

"But there are the police—the A.A. scouts—"

Sir George interrupted. "You forget, M. Poirot. *We cannot risk publicity.* If it were to get out that these plans had been stolen, the result would be extremely unfavorable to the Party."

"Ah, yes," said Poirot. "One must remember *La Politique.* The great discretion must be observed. You send instead for me. Ah, well, perhaps it is simpler."

"You are hopeful of success, M. Poirot?" Lord Mayfield sounded a trifle incredulous.

The little man shrugged. "Why not? One has only to reason—to reflect."

He paused a moment and then said, "I would like now to speak to Mr. Carlile."

"Certainly." Lord Mayfield rose. "I asked him to wait up. He will be somewhere near at hand."

He went out of the room.

Poirot looked at Sir George. "*Eh bien,*" he said. "What about this man on the terrace?"

"My dear M. Poirot, don't ask me! I didn't see him, and I can't describe him."

Poirot leaned forward. "So you have already said. But it is a little different from that, is it not?"

"What d'you mean?" asked Sir George abruptly.

"How shall I say it? Your disbelief, it is more profound."

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Sir George started to speak, then stopped.

"But yes," said Poirot encouragingly. "Tell me. You are both at the end of the terrace. Lord Mayfield sees a shadow slip from the window and across the grass. Why do you not see that shadow?"

Carrington stared at him.

"You've hit it, M. Poirot. I've been worrying about that ever since. You see, I'd swear that no one did leave this window. I thought Mayfield had imagined it—branch of a tree waving—something of that kind. And then when we came in here and found there had been a robbery, it seemed as though Mayfield must have been right and I'd been wrong. And yet—"

Poirot smiled. "And yet you still in your heart of hearts believe in the evidence—the negative evidence—of your own eyes?"

"You're right, M. Poirot, I do."

Poirot gave another smile. "How wise you are."

Sir George said sharply, "There were no footprints on the grass edge?"

Poirot nodded. "Exactly. Lord Mayfield, he fancies he sees a shadow. Then there comes the robbery and he is sure—but sure! It is no longer a fancy—he actually *saw* the man. But that is not so. Me, I do not concern myself much with footprints and such things, but for what it is worth we have that negative evidence. *There were no footprints on the grass.* It had rained heavily this evening. If a man had crossed the terrace to the grass this evening, his footprints would have shown."

Sir George said, staring, "But then—but then—"

"It brings us back to the house. To the people in the house."

Poirot broke off as the door opened and Lord Mayfield entered with Mr. Carlile.

Though still looking pale and worried, the secretary had regained a certain composure. Adjusting his pince-nez, he sat down and looked at Poirot inquiringly.

"How long had you been in this room when you heard the scream, monsieur?"

Carlile considered. "Between five and ten minutes, I should say."

"And before that there had been no disturbance of any kind?"

"No."

"I understand that the house party had been in one room for the greater part of the evening."

"Yes, the drawing room."

Poirot consulted his notebook.

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"Sir George Carrington and his wife. Mrs. Macatta. Mrs. Vanderlyn. Mr. Reggie Carrington. Lord Mayfield and yourself. Is that right?"

"I myself was not in the drawing room. I was working here the greater part of the evening."

Poirot turned to Lord Mayfield. "Who went up to bed first?"

"Lady Julia Carrington, I think. No, as a matter of fact, the three ladies went out together."

"And then?"

"Mr. Carlile came in and I told him to get out the papers as Sir George and I would be along soon."

"It was then that you decided to take a turn on the terrace?"

"Yes."

"Was anything said in Mrs. Vanderlyn's hearing as to your working in the study?"

"The matter was mentioned, yes."

"But she was not in the room when you instructed Mr. Carlile to get out the papers?"

"No."

"Excuse me, Lord Mayfield," said Carlile. "Just after you had said that, I collided with her in the doorway. She had come back for a book."

"So she might have overheard?"

"I think it is quite possible, yes."

"She came back for a book," mused Poirot. "Did she find her book, Lord Mayfield?"

"Yes, Reggie gave it to her."

"Ah, yes, it is what you call the old gasp—no, pardon, the old wheeze—that—to come back for a book. It is often useful!"

"You think it was deliberate?"

Poirot shrugged. "And after that, you two gentlemen go out on the terrace. And Mrs. Vanderlyn?"

"She went off with her book."

"And the young M. Reggie. He went to bed also?"

"Yes."

"And Mr. Carlile he comes here and between five and ten minutes later he heard a scream. Continue, Mr. Carlile. You heard a scream and you went out into the hall. Ah, perhaps it would be simplest if you reproduced exactly your actions."

Mr. Carlile got up a little awkwardly.

"Here I scream," said Poirot helpfully. He opened his mouth and emitted a shrill bleat. Lord Mayfield turned his head away to hide a smile and Mr. Carlile looked extremely uncomfortable.

"*Allez!* Forward! March!" cried Poirot. "It is your cue

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that I give you there."

Mr. Carlile walked stiffly to the door, opened it, and went out. Poirot followed him. The other two followed Poirot.

"The door, did you close it after you or leave it open?"

"I can't really remember. I think I must have left it open."

"No matter. Proceed."

Still with extreme stiffness, Mr. Carlile walked to the bottom of the staircase and stood there looking up.

Poirot said, "The maid, you say, was on the stairs. Whereabouts?"

"About halfway up."

"And she was looking upset."

"Definitely so."

"*Eh bien*, me, I am the maid." Poirot ran nimbly up the stairs. "About here?"

"A step or two higher."

"Like this?"

Poirot struck an attitude.

"Well—er—not quite like that."

"How then?"

"Well, she had her hands to her head."

"Ah, her hands to her *head*. That is very interesting. Like this?" Poirot raised his arms and his hands rested on his head just above each ear.

"Yes, that's it."

"Aha! And tell me, M. Carlile, she was a pretty girl—yes?"

"Really, I didn't notice."

"Aha, you did not notice? But you are a young man. Does not a young man notice when a girl is pretty?"

"Really, M. Poirot, I can only repeat that *I* did not do so."

Carlile cast an agonized glance at his employer. Sir George Carrington gave a sudden chuckle.

"M. Poirot seems determined to make you out a gay dog, Charlie," he remarked.

Mr. Carlile gave him a cold glance.

"Me, I always notice when a girl is pretty," announced Poirot as he descended the stairs.

The silence with which Mr. Carlile greeted this remark was somewhat pointed.

Poirot went on, "And it was then she told you this tale of having seen a ghost?"

"Yes."

"Did you believe the story?"

"Well, hardly, M. Poirot!"

"I do not mean, do you believe in ghosts. I mean, did it strike you that the girl herself really thought she had seen something?"

"Oh, as to that, I couldn't say. She was certainly breathing fast and seemed upset."

"You did not see or hear anything of her mistress?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I

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did. She came out of her room in the gallery above and called, 'Leonie.' "

"And then?"

"The girl ran up to her and I went back to the study."

"While you were standing at the foot of the stairs here, could anyone have entered the study by the door you had left open?"

Carlile shook his head. "Not without passing me. The study door is at the end of the passage, as you see."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Mr. Carlile went on in his careful, precise voice. "I may say that I am very thankful that Lord Mayfield actually saw the thief leaving through the French window. Otherwise I myself should be in a very unpleasant position."

"Nonsense, my dear Carlile," broke in Lord Mayfield impatiently. "No suspicion could possibly attach to you."

"It is very kind of you to say so, Lord Mayfield, but facts are facts, and I can quite see that it looks bad for me. In any case I hope that my belongings and myself may be searched."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," said Mayfield.

Poirot murmured, "You are serious in wishing that?"

"I should infinitely prefer it."

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for a minute or two and murmured, "I see." Then he asked, "Where is Mrs. Vanderlyn's room situated in regard to the study?"

"It is directly above it."

"With a window looking out over the terrace?"

"Yes."

Again Poirot nodded. Then he said, "Let us go to the drawing room."

Here he wandered round the room, examined the fastenings of the windows, glanced at the score pads on the bridge table, and then finally addressed Lord Mayfield.

"This affair," he said, "is more complicated than it appears. But one thing is quite certain. The stolen plans have not left this house."

Lord Mayfield stared at him. "But, my dear M. Poirot, the man I saw leaving the study—"

"There was no man."

"But I *saw* him—"

"With the greatest respect, Lord Mayfield, you imagined you saw him. The shadow cast by the branch of a tree deceived you. The fact that a robbery occurred naturally seemed a proof that what you had imagined was true."

"Really, M. Poirot, the evidence of my own eyes—"

"Back my eyes against yours any day, old boy," put in Sir George.

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"You must permit me, Lord Mayfield, to be very definite on that point. *No one crossed the terrace to the grass.*"

Looking very pale and speaking stiffly, Mr. Carlile said, "In that case, if M. Poirot is correct, suspicion automatically attaches itself to me. I am the only person who could possibly have committed the robbery."

Lord Mayfield sprang up.

"Nonsense. Whatever M. Poirot thinks about it, I don't agree with him. I am convinced of your innocence, my dear Carlile. In fact, I'm willing to guarantee it."

Poirot murmured mildly, "But I have not said that I suspect M. Carlile."

Carlile answered, "No, but you've made it perfectly clear that no one else had a chance to commit the robbery."

"*Du tout! Du tout!*"

"But I have told you nobody passed me in the hall to get to the study door."

"I agree. But someone might have come in through the study *window.*"

"But that is just what you said did not happen!"

"I said that no one from *outside* could have come and left without leaving marks on the grass. But it could have been managed from *inside* the house. Someone could have gone out from this room by one of these windows, slipped along the terrace, gone in by the study window, and come back again in here."

Mr. Carlile objected, "But Lord Mayfield and Sir George Carrington were *on* the terrace."

"They were on the terrace, yes, but they were *en promenade.* Sir George Carrington's eyes may be of the most reliable"—Poirot made a little bow—"but he does not keep them in the back of his head! The study window is at the extreme left of the terrace, the windows of this room are next, but the terrace continues to the right past one, two, three, perhaps four rooms?"

"Dining room, billiard room, morning room, and library," said Lord Mayfield.

"And you walked up and down the terrace, how many times?"

"At least five or six."

"You see, it is easy enough, the thief has only to watch for the right moment."

Carlile said slowly, "You mean that when I was in the hall, talking to the French girl, the thief was waiting in the drawing room?"

"That is my suggestion. It is, of course, only a suggestion."

"It doesn't sound very probable to me," said Lord Mayfield. "Too risky."

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The air marshal demurred. "I don't agree with you, Charles. It's perfectly possible. Wonder I hadn't the wits to think of it for myself."

"So you see," said Poirot, "why I believe that the plans are still in the house. The problem now is to find them."

Sir George snorted. "That's simple enough. Search everybody."

Lord Mayfield made a movement of dissent, but Poirot spoke before he could.

"No, no, it is not so simple as that. The person who took those plans will make quite sure that they are not found among his or her belongings. They will have been hidden in neutral ground."

"Do you suggest that we've got to go playing hide and seek all over the bally house?"

Poirot smiled.

"No, no, we need not be so crude as that. We can arrive at the hiding place—or alternatively at the identity of the guilty person—by reflection. That will simplify matters. In the morning I would like an interview with every person in the house. It would, I think, be unwise to seek those interviews now."

Lord Mayfield nodded. "Cause too much comment," he said, "if we dragged everybody out of their beds at three in the morning. In any case, you'll have to proceed with a good deal of camouflage, M. Poirot. This matter has got to be kept dark."

Poirot waved an airy hand. "Leave it to Hercule Poirot. The lies I invent are always most delicate and most convincing. Tomorrow, then, I conduct my investigations. But tonight I should like to begin by interviewing you, Sir George, and you, Lord Mayfield."

He bowed to them both.

"You mean—alone?"

"That was my meaning."

Lord Mayfield raised his eyes slightly, then he said, "Certainly. I'll leave you alone with Sir George. When you want me, you'll find me in my study. Come, Carlile."

He and the secretary went out, shutting the door behind them.

Sir George sat down, reaching mechanically for a cigarette. He turned a puzzled face to Poirot.

"You know," he said slowly. "I don't quite get this."

"That is very simply explained," said Poirot with a smile. "In two words, to be more precise. Mrs. Vanderlyn!"

"Oh," said Carrington. "I think I see. Mrs. Vanderlyn?"

"Exactly. It might be, you see, that it would not be very delicate to ask Lord Mayfield

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the question I want to ask. *Why* Mrs. Vanderlyn? This lady, she is known to be a suspicious character. Why, then, should she be here? I say to myself there are three possible explanations. One, that Lord Mayfield has a *penchant* for the lady—and that is why I seek to talk to you alone. I do not wish to embarrass him. Two, that Mrs. Vanderlyn is perhaps the dear friend of someone else in the house?"

"You can count me out!" said Sir George with a grin.

"Then, if neither of those possibilities is true, the question returns in redoubled force. *Why Mrs. Vanderlyn?* And it seems to me I perceive a shadowy answer. There was a *reason.* Her presence at this particular juncture was definitely desired by Lord Mayfield for a special reason. Am I right?"

Sir George nodded.

"You're quite right," he said. "Mayfield is too old a bird to fall for her wiles. He wanted her here for quite another reason. It was like this."

He told the conversation that had taken place at the dinner table. Poirot listened attentively.

"Ah," he said. "I comprehend now. Nevertheless, it seems that the lady has turned the tables on you both rather neatly!"

Sir George swore freely.

Poirot watched him with some slight amusement, then he said, "You do not doubt that this theft is her doing—I mean, that she is responsible for it, whether or not she played an active part?"

Sir George stared. "Of course not! There isn't the least doubt of that. Why, who else would have any interest in stealing those plans?"

"Ah," said Hercule Poirot. He leaned back and looked at the ceiling. "And yet, Sir George, we agreed, not a quarter of an hour ago, that these papers represented very definitely money. Not perhaps in quite so obvious a form as banknotes, or gold, or jewelry, but nevertheless they were potential money. If there were anyone here who was hard up—"

The other interrupted him with a snort. "Who isn't these days? I suppose I can say it without incriminating myself."

He smiled and Poirot smiled politely back at him and murmured, "*Mais oui*, you can say what you like, for you, Sir George, have the one unimpeachable alibi in this affair."

"But I'm damned hard up myself!"

Poirot shook his head sadly. "Yes, indeed, a man in your position has heavy living ex-

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penses. Then you have a young son at a most expensive age—"

Sir George groaned. "Education's bad enough, then debts on top of it. Mind you, he's not a bad lad."

Poirot listened sympathetically. He heard a lot of the air marshal's accumulated grievances. The lack of grit and stamina in the younger generation, the fantastic way in which mothers spoiled their children and always took their side, the curse of gambling once it got hold of a woman, the folly of playing for higher stakes than you could afford. It was all couched in general terms, Sir George did not allude directly to either his wife or his son, but his natural transparency made his generalizations easy to see through.

He broke off suddenly. "Sorry, mustn't take up your time with something that's off the subject, especially at this hour of the night—or rather, morning."

He stifled a yawn.

"I suggest, Sir George, that you should go to bed. You have been most kind and helpful."

"Right, think I will turn in. You really think there is a chance of getting the plans back?"

Poirot shrugged. "I do not see why not."

"Well, I'll be off. Good night."

He left the room.

Poirot remained in his chair staring thoughtfully at the ceiling, then he took out a little notebook and turning to a clean page, he wrote:

Mrs. Vanderlyn?
Lady Julia Carrington?
Mrs. Macatta?
Reggie Carrington?
Mr. Carlile?

Underneath, he wrote:

Mrs. Vanderlyn and Mr. Reggie Carrington?
Mrs. Vanderlyn and Lady Julia?
Mrs. Vanderlyn and Mr. Carlile?

He shook his head in a dissatisfied manner, murmuring:

"C'est plus simple que ca."

Then he added a few short sentences.

Did Lord Mayfield see a "shadow"? If not, why did he say he did? Did Sir George see anything? He was positive he had seen nothing AFTER I examined flowerbed. Note: *Lord Mayfield is near-sighted, can read without glasses but has to use a monocle to look across a room. Sir George is long-sighted. Therefore, from the far end of the terrace, his sight is more to be depended upon than Lord Mayfield's. Yet Lord Mayfield is very positive that he*

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DID see something and is quite unshaken by his friend's denial.

Can anyone be quite as above suspicion as Mr. Carlile appears to be? Lord Mayfield is very emphatic as to his innocence. Too much so. Why? Because he secretly suspects him and is ashamed of his suspicions? Or because he definitely suspects some other person? That is to say, some person OTHER than Mrs. Vanderlyn?

Lord Mayfield was seated at his desk when Poirot entered the study. He swung round, laid down his pen, and looked up.

"Well, M. Poirot, had your interview with Carrington?"

Poirot smiled and sat down.

"Yes, Lord Mayfield. He cleared up a point that had puzzled me."

"What was that?"

"The reason for Mrs. Vanderlyn's presence here. You comprehend, I thought it possible—"

Mayfield was quick to realize the cause of Poirot's somewhat exaggerated embarrassment.

"You thought I had a weakness for the lady? Not at all! Far from it. Funnily enough, Carrington thought the same."

"Yes, he has told me of the conversation he held with you on the subject."

Lord Mayfield looked rather rueful.

"My little scheme didn't come off. Always annoying to have to admit that a woman has got the better of you."

"Ah, but she has not got the better of you *yet*, Lord Mayfield."

"You think we may yet win? Well, I'm glad to hear you say so. I'd like to think it was true."

He sighed.

"I feel that I've acted like a complete fool—so pleased with my stratagem for entrapping the lady."

Hercule Poirot said, as he lit one of his tiny cigarettes, "What *was* your stratagem exactly, Lord Mayfield?"

"Well," Lord Mayfield hesitated. "I hadn't exactly got down to details."

"You didn't discuss it with anyone?"

"No."

"Not even with Mr. Carlile?"

"No."

Poirot smiled. "You prefer to play a lone hand, Lord Mayfield."

"I have usually found it the best way," said the other a little grimly.

"Yes, you are wise. *Trust no one.* But you *did* mention the matter to Sir George Carrington?"

"Simply because I realized

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that the dear fellow was seriously perturbed about me."

Lord Mayfield smiled at the remembrance.

"He is an old friend of yours?"

"Yes. I have known him for over twenty years."

"And his wife?"

"I have known his wife also, of course."

"But—pardon me if I am impertinent—you are not on the same terms with her?"

"I don't really see what my personal relationships to people has to do with the matter in hand, M. Poirot."

"But I think, Lord Mayfield, that they may have a good deal to do with it. You agreed, did you not, that my theory of someone in the drawing room was a possible one?"

"Yes. In fact, I agree with you that is what must have happened."

"We will not say 'must.' That is too self-confident a word. But if that theory of mine is true, who do you think the person in the drawing room could have been?"

"Obviously Mrs. Vanderlyn. She had been back there once for a book. She could have come back for another book, or a handbag, or a dropped handkerchief—one of a dozen feminine excuses. She arranges with her maid to scream and get Carlile away from the study. Then she slips in and out by the windows, as you said."

"You forget it could not have been Mrs. Vanderlyn. Carlile heard her call the maid from *upstairs* while he was talking to the girl."

Lord Mayfield bit his lip. "True. I forgot that." He looked thoroughly annoyed.

"You see," said Poirot gently. "We progress. We have first the simple explanation of a thief who comes from *outside* and makes off with the booty. A very convenient theory as I said at the time, too convenient to be readily accepted. We have disposed of that. Then we come to the theory of the foreign agent, Mrs. Vanderlyn, and that again seems to fit together beautifully up to a certain point. But now it looks as though that, too, was too easy—too convenient—to be accepted."

"You'd wash Mrs. Vanderlyn out of it altogether?"

"It was not Mrs. Vanderlyn in the drawing room. It may have been an ally of Mrs. Vanderlyn's who committed the theft, but it is just possible that it was committed by another person altogether. If so, we have to consider the question of motive."

"Isn't this rather far-fetched, M. Poirot?"

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"I do not think so. Now what motives could there be? There is the motive of money. The papers may have been stolen with the object of turning them into cash. That is the simplest motive to consider. But the motive might possibly be something quite different."

"Such as—"

Poirot said slowly, "It might have been done with the idea of damaging someone."

"Who?"

"Possibly Mr. Carlile. He would be the obvious suspect. But there might be more to it than that. The men who control the destiny of a country, Lord Mayfield, are particularly vulnerable to displays of popular feeling."

"Meaning that the theft was aimed at damaging *me?*"

Poirot nodded. "I think I am correct in saying, Lord Mayfield, that about five years ago you passed through a somewhat trying time. You were suspected of friendship with a European Power at that time bitterly unpopular with the electorate of this country."

"Quite true, M. Poirot."

"A statesman in these days has a difficult task. He has to pursue the policy he deems advantageous to his country, but he has at the same time to recognize the force of popular feeling. Popular feeling is very often sentimental, muddle-headed, and eminently unsound, but it cannot be disregarded for all that."

"How well you express it! That is exactly the curse of a politican's life. He has to bow to the country's feeling, however dangerous and foolhardy he knows it to be."

"That was your dilemma, I think. There were rumors that you had concluded an agreement with the country in question. This country and the newspapers were up in arms about it. Fortunately the Prime Minister was able categorically to deny the story, and you repudiated it, though still making no secret of the way your sympathies lay."

"All this is quite true, M. Poirot, but why rake up past history?"

"Because I consider it possible that an enemy, disappointed in the way you surmounted that crisis, might endeavor to stage a further dilemma. You soon regained public confidence. Those older circumstances have passed away, and you are now, deservedly, one of the most popular figures in political life. You are spoken of freely as the next Prime Minister."

"You think this is an attempt to discredit me? Nonsense!"

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"*Tout de meme*, Lord Mayfield, it would not look well if it were known that the plans of Britain's new bomber had been stolen during a weekend when a certain very charming lady had been your guest. Little hints in the newspapers as to your relationship with that lady would create a deep feeling of distrust in you."

"Such a thing could not really be taken seriously."

"My dear Lord Mayfield, you know perfectly well it could! It takes so little to undermine public confidence."

"Yes, that's true," said Lord Mayfield. He looked suddenly worried. "God, how desperately complicated this business is becoming. Do you really think—but it's impossible—"

"You know of nobody who is—jealous of you?"

"Absurd!"

"At any rate, you will admit that my questions about your personal relationships with the members of this house party are not totally irrelevant."

"Oh, perhaps—perhaps. You asked me about Julia Carrington. There's really not very much to say. I've never taken to her very much, and I don't think she cares for me. She's one of these restless, nervous women, recklessly extravagant and mad about cards. She's old-fashioned enough, I think, to despise me for being a self-made man."

Poirot said, "I looked you up in *Who's Who* before I came down. You were the head of a famous engineering firm and a first-class engineer yourself."

Lord Mayfield spoke rather grimly. "There's certainly nothing I don't know about the practical side. I've worked my way up from the bottom."

"Oh la la!" cried Poirot. "I have been a fool—but a fool!"

The other stared at him. "I beg your pardon, M. Poirot?"

"It is that a portion of the puzzle has become clear to me. Something I did not see before . . . But it all fits in. Yes—it fits with precision."

Lord Mayfield looked at him in astonished inquiry.

But with a slight smile Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, not now. I must arrange my ideas a little more clearly." He rose. "Good night, Lord Mayfield. I think I know where those plans are."

Lord Mayfield cried out, "You know? Then let us get hold of them at once!"

Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, that would not do. Precipitancy would be fatal. But leave it all to Hercule Poirot."

(continued on page 100)

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It is more than five years since Harold R. Daniels has written a story for EQMM. Welcome back to the fold, Mr. Daniels, with a decidedly unsheepish story—with, indeed, as impudent and amusing a story as we've read in perhaps five years . . .

THREE WAYS TO ROB A BANK

by HAROLD R. DANIELS

The manuscript was neatly typed. The cover letter could have been copied almost word for word from one of those "Be an Author" publications, complete with the pro-forma "Submitted for publication at your usual rates." Miss Edwina Martin, assistant editor of *Tales of Crime and Detection*, read it first. Two things about it caught her attention. One was the title—"Three Ways to Rob a Bank. Method 1." The other was the author's name. Nathan Waite. Miss Martin, who knew nearly every professional writer of crime fiction in the United States and had had dealings with most of them, didn't recognize the name.

The letter lacked the usual verbosity of the fledgling writer, but a paragraph toward the middle caught her eye. "You may want to change the title because what Rawlings did wasn't really robbery. In fact, it's probably legal. I am now working on a story which I will call 'Three Ways To Rob a Bank. Method 2.' I will send this to you when I finish having it retyped. Method 2 is almost certainly legal. If you want to check Method 1, I suggest that you show this to your own banker."

Rawlings, it developed, was the protagonist in the story. The story itself was crude and redundant; it failed to develop its characters and served almost solely as a vehicle to outline Method 1. The method itself had to do with the extension of credit to holders of checking accounts—one of those deals where the bank urges holders of checking accounts to write checks without having funds to back them. The bank would extend credit. No papers. No notes. (The author's distrust of this form of merchandizing emerged clearly in the story.)

Miss Martin's first impulse was to send the story back with

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a polite letter of rejection. (She never used the heartless printed rejection slip.) But something about the confident presentation of the method bothered her. She clipped a memorandum to the manuscript, scrawled a large question mark on it, and bucked it to the editor. It came back next day with additional scrawling: "This is an awful piece of trash but the plan sounds almost real. Why don't you check it with Frank Wordell?"

Frank Wordell was a vice-president of the bank that served Miss Martin's publisher. She made a luncheon date with him, handed him the letter and the manuscript, and started to proofread some galleys while he looked it over. She glanced up when she heard him suck in his breath. He had turned a delicate shade of greenish white.

"Would it work?" she asked.

"I'm not quite sure," the vice-president said, his voice shaking. "I'd have to get an opinion from some of the people in the Check Credit Department. But I think it would." He hesitated. "Good Lord, this could cost us millions. Listen—you weren't thinking of publishing this, were you? I mean, if it got into the hands of the public—"

Miss Martin, who had no great admiration for the banking mentality, was non-committal. "It needs work," she said. "We haven't made a decision."

The banker pushed his plate away. "And he says he's got another one. His Method Two. If it's anything like this it could ruin the entire banking business." A thought came to him. "He calls this '*Three* Ways to Rob a Bank.' That means there must be a Method Three. This is terrible! No, no, we can't let you publish this and we must see this man at once."

This was an unfortunate approach to use with Edwina Martin who reached out her hand for the letter and manuscript. "That is our decision to make," she told him coldly. It was only after he had pleaded the potential destruction of the country's economy that she let him take the papers back to the bank. He was so upset that he neglected to pay the luncheon check.

He called her several hours later. "We've held an emergency meeting," he told her. "The Check Credit people think that Method One *would* work. It might also be legal but even if it isn't it would cost us millions in lawsuits. Listen, Miss Martin, we want you to buy the story and assign the copyright to us. Would that protect us against him selling the story to someone else?"

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"In its present form," she told him. "But there would be nothing to prevent him from writing another story using the same method." Remembering his failure to pay the luncheon check, she was not inclined to be especially cooperative. "And we don't buy material that we don't intend to publish."

But after an emergency confrontation between a committee of the City Banking Association, called into extraordinary session, and the publisher, it was decided to buy Nathan Waite's story and to lock the manuscript in the deepest vault of the biggest bank. In the interest of the national economy.

Economy, Miss Martin decided, was an appropriate word. During the confrontation a Saurian old capitalist with a personal worth in the tens of millions brought up the subject of payment to Nathan Waite. "I suppose we must buy it," he grumbled. "What do you pay for stories of this type?"

Miss Martin, knowing the author had never been published and hence had no "name" value, suggested a figure. "Of course," she said, "since it will never be published there is no chance of foreign income or anthology fees, let alone possible movie or TV rights." (The Saurian visibly shuddered.) "So I think it would be only fair to give the author a little more than the usual figure."

The Saurian protested. "No, no. Couldn't think of it. After all, we won't ever get our money back. And we'll have to buy Method Two and Method Three. Think of that. Besides, we've still got to figure out a way to keep him from writing other stories using the same methods. The usual figure will have to do. No extras."

Since there were 30 banks in the Association and since the assessment for each would be less than $10.00 per story, Miss Martin failed to generate any deep concern for the Saurian.

That same day Miss Martin forwarded a check and a letter to Nathan Waite. The letter explained that at this time no publication date could be scheduled but that the editor was very anxious to see the stories explaining the second and third ways to rob a bank. She signed the letter with distaste. To a virgin author, she knew, the check was insignificant compared with the glory of publication. Publication that was never to be.

A week later a letter and the manuscript for "Three Ways To Rob a Bank. Method 2" arrived. The story was a disaster but again the method sounded

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convincing. This time it involved magnetic ink and data processing. By prearrangement Miss Martin brought it to Frank Wordell's office. He read it rapidly and shivered. "The man's a genius," he muttered. "Of course, he's had a lot of background in the field—"

"What was that? How would you know about his background?" Edwina asked.

He said in an offhand manner, "Oh, we've had him thoroughly checked out, of course. Had one of the best detective agencies in the business investigate him—ever since you showed me that first letter. Couldn't get a thing on him."

Miss Martin's voice was ominously flat. "Do you mean to tell me that you had Mr. Waite *investigated*—a man you only learned of through his correspondence with us?"

"Of course." Wordell sounded faintly surprised. "A man that has dangerous knowledge like he has. Couldn't just trust to luck that he wouldn't do something with it besides write stories. Oh, no, couldn't let it drop. He worked in a bank for years and years, you know. Small town in Connecticut. They let him go a year ago. Had to make room for the president's nephew. Gave him a pension though. Ten per cent of his salary."

"Years and years, you said. How many years?"

"Oh, I don't remember. Have to look at the report. Twenty-five, I think."

"Then naturally he wouldn't hold any resentment over being let go," she said drily. She put out her hand. "Let me see his letter again."

The letter that had accompanied the second manuscript had cordially thanked the publisher for accepting the first story and for the check. One paragraph said, "I assume you checked Method 1 with your banker as I suggested. I hope you'll show him Method 2 also, just to be sure it would work. As I said in my first letter, it's almost certainly legal."

Miss Martin asked, "Is it legal?"

"Is what legal?"

"Method Two. The one you just read about."

"Put it this way. It isn't illegal. To make it illegal, every bank using data processing would have to make some major changes in its forms and procedures. It would take months and in the meantime it could cost us even more millions than Method One. This is a terrible thing, Miss Martin—a terrible thing."

Method 2 caused panic in the chambers of the City Banking Association. There was

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general agreement that the second story must also be bought immediately and sequestered forever. There was also general agreement that since Method 3 might be potentially even more catastrophic, there could be no more waiting for more stories from Mr. Waite. (Miss Martin, who was present, asked if the price of the second story could be raised in view of the fact that Mr. Waite was now, having received one check, a professional author. Saurian pointed out that Waite hadn't actually been published, so the extra expense was not justified.)

A plan was adopted. Miss Martin was to invite Mr. Waite to come up from Connecticut, ostensibly for an author-editor chat. Actually he would be brought before a committee chosen by the City Banking Association. "We'll have our lawyers there," Saurian said. "We'll put the fear of the Lord into him. Make him tell us about that Method Three. Pay him the price of another story if we have to. Then we'll work out some way to shut him up."

With this plan Miss Martin and her fellow editors and her publisher went along most reluctantly. She almost wished that she had simply rejected Nathan Waite's first submission. Most particularly she resented the attitude of the bankers. In their view, Nathan Waite was nothing more than a common criminal.

She called Nathan Waite at his Connecticut home and invited him to come in. The City Banking Association, she resolved to herself, would pay his expenses, whatever devious steps she might have to take to manage it.

His voice on the phone was surprisingly youthful and had only a suggestion of Yankee twang. "Guess I'm pretty lucky selling two stories one right after the other. I'm sure grateful, Miss Martin. And I'll be happy to come in and see you. I suppose you want to talk about the next one."

Her conscience nipped at her. "Well, yes, Mr. Waite. Methods One and Two were so clever that there's a lot of interest in Method Three."

"You just call me Nate, Miss. Now, one thing about Method Three: there's no question about it being legal. The fact is, it's downright honest. Compared with One and Two, that is. Speaking about One and Two, did you check them with your banker? I figured you must have shown him Method One before you bought the story. I was just wondering if he was impressed by Method Two."

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She said faintly, "Oh, he was impressed all right."

"Then I guess he'll be really interested in Method Three."

They concluded arrangements for his visit in two days and hung up.

He showed up at Miss Martin's office precisely on time—a small man in his fifties with glistening white hair combed in an old-fashioned part on one side. His face was tanned and made an effective backdrop for his sharp blue eyes. He bowed with a charming courtliness that made Miss Martin feel even more of a Judas. She came from behind her desk. "Mr. Waite—" she began.

"Nate."

"All right. Nate. I'm disgusted with this whole arrangement and I don't know how we let ourselves be talked into it. Nate, we didn't buy your stories to publish them. To be honest—and it's about time—the stories are awful. We bought them because the bank—the banks, I should say—asked us to. They're afraid if the stories were published, people would start actually using your methods."

He frowned. "Awful, you say. I'm disappointed to hear that. I thought the one about Method Two wasn't that bad."

She put her hand on his arm in a gesture of sympathy and looked up to see that he was grinning. "Of course they were awful," he said. "I deliberately wrote them that way. I'll bet it was almost as hard as writing good stuff. So the banks felt the methods would work, eh? I'm not surprised. I put a lot of thought into them."

"They're even more interested in Method Three," she told him. "They want to meet you this afternoon and discuss buying your next story. Actually, they want to pay you *not* to write it. Or write anything else," she added.

"It won't be any great loss to the literary world. Who will we be meeting? The City Banking Association? An old fellow who looks like a crocodile?"

Miss Edwina Martin, with the feel for a plot developed after reading thousands of detective stories, stepped back and looked at him. "You know all about this," she accused him.

He shook his head. "Not all about it. But I sort of planned it. And I felt it was working out the way I planned when they put a detective agency to work investigating me."

"They had no business doing that," she said angrily. "I want you to know that we had nothing to do with it. We didn't

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even know about it until afterwards. And I'm not going to the meeting with you. I wash my hands of the whole business. Let them buy your next story themselves."

"I want you to come," he said. "You just might enjoy it."

She agreed on condition that he hold out for more money than her publisher had ostensibly been paying him. "I sort of planned on charging a bit more," he told her. "I mean, seeing they're that much interested in Method Three."

At lunch he told her something of his banking career and a great deal more about his life in a small Connecticut town. This plain-speaking, simple man, she learned, was an amateur mathematician of considerable reputation. He was an authority on cybernetics and a respected astronomer.

Over coffee some of his personal philosophy emerged. "I wasn't upset when the bank let me go," he said. "Nepotism is always with us. I could have been a tycoon in a big-city bank, I suppose. But I was content to make an adequate living and it gave me time to do the things I really liked to do. I'm basically lazy. My wife died some years after we were married and there wasn't anybody to push me along harder than I wanted to go.

"Besides, there's something special about a small bank in a small town. You know everyone's problems, money and otherwise, and you can break rules now and then to help people out. The banker, in his way, is almost as important as the town doctor." He paused. "It's not like that any more. It's all regimented and computerized and dehumanized. You don't have a banker in the old sense of the word. You have a financial executive who's more and more just a part of a large corporation, answerable to a board of directors. He has to work by a strict set of rules that don't allow for any of the human factors."

Miss Martin, fascinated, signaled for more coffee.

"Like making out a deposit slip," he went on. "Used to be you walked into the bank and filled out the slip with your name and address and the amount you wanted to deposit. It made a man feel good and it was good for him. 'My name is John Doe and I earned this money and here is where I live and I want you to save this amount of money for me.' And you took it up to the cashier and passed the time of day for a minute."

Nate put sugar in his coffee. "Pretty soon there won't be any cashiers. Right now you

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can't fill out a deposit slip in most banks. They send you computer input cards with your name and number on them. All you fill in is the date and amount. The money they save on clerical work they spend on feeble-minded TV advertising. It was a TV ad for a bank that inspired me to write those stories."

Miss Martin smiled. "Nate, you used us." The smile faded. "But even if you hold them up for the Method Three story, it won't hurt anything but their feelings. The money won't come out of their pockets and even several thousands of dollars wouldn't mean anything to them."

He said softly, "The important thing is to make them realize that any mechanical system that man can devise, man can beat. If I can make them realize that the human element can't be discarded, I'll be satisfied. Now then, I suppose we should be getting along to the meeting."

Miss Martin, who had felt concern for Nathan Waite, felt suddenly confident. Nate could emerge as a match for a dozen Saurians.

A committee of twelve members of the City Banking Association, headed by the Saurian, and flanked by a dozen lawyers, awaited them. Nathan Waite nodded as he entered the committee room. The Saurian said, "You're Waite?"

Nate said quietly, "Mr. Waite."

A young lawyer in an impeccable gray suit spoke out. "Those stories that you wrote and that we paid for. You realize that your so-called methods are illegal?"

"Son, I helped write the banking laws for my state and I do an odd job now and then for the Federal Reserve Board. I'd be happy to talk banking law with you."

An older lawyer said sharply, "Shut up, Andy." He turned to Nate. "Mr. Waite, we don't know if your first two methods are criminal or not. We do know it could cost a great deal of money and trouble to conduct a test case and in the meantime, if either Method One or Two got into the hands of the public it would cause incalculable harm and loss. We'd like some assurance that this won't happen."

"You bought the stories describing the first two methods. I'm generally considered an honorable man. As Miss Martin here might put it, I won't use the same plots again."

Gray Suit said cynically, "Not this week, maybe. How about next week? You think you've got us over a barrel."

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The older lawyer said furiously, "I told you to shut up, Andy," and turned to Nate again. "I'm Peter Hart," he said, "I apologize for my colleague. I accept the fact that you are an honorable man, Mr. Waite."

Saurian interrupted. "Never mind all that. What about Method Three—the third way to rob a bank. Is it as sneaky as the first two?"

Nate said mildly, "As I told Miss Martin, 'rob' is a misnomer. Methods One and Two are unethical, perhaps illegal, methods for getting money from a bank. Method Three is legal beyond the shadow of a doubt. You have my word for that."

Twelve bankers and twelve lawyers began talking simultaneously. Saurian quieted the furor with a lifted hand. "And you mean it will work just as well as the first two methods?"

"I'm positive of it."

"Then we'll buy it. Same price as the first two stories and you won't even have to write it. Just tell us what Method Three is. And we'll give you $500 for your promise never to write another story." Saurian sank back, overwhelmed by his own generosity. Peter Hart looked disgusted.

Nathan Waite shook his head. "I've got a piece of paper here," he said. "It was drawn up by the best contract lawyer in my state. Good friend of mine. I'll be glad to let Mr. Hart look it over. What it calls for is that your Association pay me $25,000 a year for the rest of my life and that payments be made thereafter in perpetuity to various charitable organizations to be named in my will."

Bedlam broke loose. Miss Martin felt like cheering and she caught a smile of admiration on Peter Hart's face.

Nate waited patiently for the commotion to die down. When he could be heard he said, "That's too much money to pay for just a story. So, as the contract specifies, I'll serve as consultant to the City Banking Association—call it Consultant in Human Relations. That's a nice-sounding title. Being a consultant, of course, I'll be too busy to write any more stories. That's in the contract too."

Gray Suit was on his feet, yelling for attention. "What about Method Three? Is that explained in the contract? We've got to know about Method Three!"

Nate nodded. "I'll tell you about it as soon as the contract is signed."

Peter Hart held up his hand for quiet. "If you'll wait in the anteroom, Mr. Waite, we'd like to discuss the contract among ourselves."

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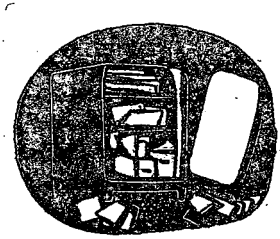
Nate waited with Miss Martin. "You were tremendous," she said. "Do you think they'll agree?"

"I'm sure they will. They might argue about Clause Seven—gives me the right to approve or disapprove of all TV bank commercials." His eyes twinkled. "But they're so scared of Method Three I think they'll agree to even that."

Five minutes later Peter Hart called them back to face a subdued group of committee members. "We have decided that the Association badly needs a Consultant in Human Relations," he said. "Mr. Graves"—he nodded toward a deflated Saurian—"and myself have signed in behalf of the City Banking Association. By the way, the contract is beautifully drafted—there's no possibility of a legal loophole. You have only to sign it yourself."

Gray Suit was on his feet again. "Wait a minute," he shouted. "He still hasn't told us about Method Three."

Nate reached for the contract. "Oh, yes," he murmured, after he had signed it. " 'Three Ways to Rob a Bank.' Method Three. Well, it's really quite simple. *This* is Method Three."



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a NEW police story by

LAWRENCE TREAT

To what extent does a detective's work impinge on and influence his marriage? And to what extent does a detective's marriage impinge on and influence his work?

WIFE TROUBLE

by LAWRENCE TREAT

Marty Gunther sat at his desk in the room marked *Detective* and scowled. Three months married, and he had wife trouble. An even bet that Edna would pull out on him by tonight.

He drew a few lopsided circles on a sheet of paper, but all he could think of was a black-eyed angry girl who figured she was an authority on drunks. Which was how this scrap of theirs had started, when he'd been telling her about some lush he'd picked up.

"Off his rocker," Marty had said. "Kept yelling he loved his wife, and he wanted to fight anybody that wouldn't believe him. We had a job taking him in, and had to muss him up a little."

The small blue vein on Edna's forehead had throbbed, and her quick pale face tightened up. "What good did that do?" she asked. "When he really needed help."

"Him?" Marty said. "Help? The guy was boiled to the ears."

"So you hit him? I just can't believe it."

"Look," Marty said. "We booked him for disorderly, and it says in the manual that you can use such force as is necessary in order to make the arrest."

But instead of admitting he was right she'd started arguing, as if there was something wrong with the rule book. Then he'd shot off his mouth, and the fight they'd had was a honey. She'd ended it by screaming out that she couldn't live with a guy like Marty.

At this recollection his lower lip jutted and he ran his hand

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through his stiff curly hair. She wanted him to be a knight in shining armor and change the world. Help all the drunks and reform all the crooks. She couldn't get it through her head that he was just a cop, that he did what had to be done. No more and no less.

So how do you handle her? You can't back down, and you got to teach her to lay off. But how?

He rolled his heavy shoulders and wished he was anywhere except here, sitting at a desk with his mind going round and round, and nobody to take it out on.

When he heard a knock on the door he grunted. "Come on in," he said. He dropped one chunky palm on the desk and looked up.

The guy that stepped inside had the hands of a mechanic, with grease rubbed into his pores. But his face was narrow, his mouth small and thin, and his suit stretched tight on his undersized frame.

He stood there twitching, but then they were all nervous. They seemed to think they were brave or something, just walking in here. So Marty let the guy fidget, without feeding him questions.

The guy finally said, "They told me to see you. To make a report."

Marty slid today's sports section over the sheet of paper he'd been drawing circles on. He kicked the extra chair away from the desk and said, "Sit down. What is it?"

"I was held up. Somebody took five hundred dollars."

Marty wrote the figure, 500, on a scratch pad, and then added a few zeros. "Let's have your name and address," he said. "Then tell me how it happened."

"Arnold. 2314 West Street." The guy gulped, and his Adam's apple pumped up and down. "I was on my way home from the shop. I was standing at the bus stop and this car was waiting for the light. The driver looked at me, and I walked over and asked him for a lift and he said sure. I got in, and he drove along for a while and then he pulled a gun."

"When was this?" Marty asked, getting a funny feeling.

"Yesterday afternoon, around one o'clock. I'm on the early shift at the refinery. I quit at noon."

Marty crossed out the figure 5. You can spot the phonies every time, you can almost smell 'em. He'd told that to Edna once and she'd said, "How?" He'd looked at her as if she was crazy.

If she had to sit here and listen to this joker, maybe she'd

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understand what Marty was up against. A dumb jerk giving out with stuff like this. How the driver of this car brought him up to the country and took his dough and dumped him on a country road, and how he'd gotten a hitch back and didn't get home until around eight that evening. And waited till today to report it.

Nuts.

"How do I know you had five hundred?" Marty asked sweetly.

Arnold grinned. "I took it out of the bank the day before. Here, I can show you the withdrawal." He handed Marty a bank book and pointed eagerly to the last entry. "We were going to buy a car, a second-hand one that we could afford."

"Who's we?"

"My wife and I."

"So you didn't get home till eight at night," Marty said. "I guess she was worried, huh?"

"Worried sick. She almost called the police."

"Yeah," Marty said. "Well, we'll look into it."

Nine times out of ten he would have dropped it there. The guy had some kind of an angle, but what of it? He'd made his complaint, he knew it was a lulu, and that nothing could happen. And Marty knew it too—so he could forget about the whole thing and not even fill out a form.

But he was sore at Edna. That business with her had gotten under his skin and he wanted to crack down on somebody, but good. And if Edna was still home tonight, maybe Marty could teach her some sense and show her that only suckers went out of their way to help people out.

"Yeah," he said again, blandly, baiting the trap. "But first you better make out an affidavit. You got to do that because sometimes we get false complaints. But when they're sworn to, that makes it perjury and can mean five years in the coop."

The Adam's apple jerked along the skinny throat. "I didn't know that."

Marty gave him a surprised look. "No kidding?"

"An affidavit—it sounds complicated."

"You're here," Marty said cheerfully, "so you may as well go through with it. Now you say this guy went up the parkway. Did he take the detour?"

"Oh, sure."

"What detour?"

"You said—" Arnold stopped himself and his eyes wavered. "I guess I didn't notice good. I was upset."

"Let's lay it on the line,"

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Marty said, pounding down on him. "You come in here with this story. We put it on the teletype, we get maybe ten cops looking for the guy. But you don't care, it's not your worry, you don't mind making monkeys out of us. When the thing never happened."

Arnold looked as if Marty had slipped him a rabbit punch, and Marty bore down harder. "What did you do with the dough?" he demanded.

Arnold stared at his hands.

"You want to push this?" Marty said. "If you do you're going to end up in court."

"I just wanted to report what happened."

"Look," Marty said. "You tell me what the big idea is, or else you got trouble. Plenty."

Arnold squirmed. He said in a high-pitched voice, "It's that car. My wife wanted to buy an old wreck for a few hundred, and I wanted a nice new job. We had an argument, and I thought I'd show her. I had the five hundred, so I went to the track yesterday, only instead of winning I dropped the whole wad. I got home late and I didn't know what to tell her, so I made up this story about being robbed. Then she insisted I come here and report it. I *had* to. Don't you see?"

Marty saw all right. Wife trouble, same as himself. Only this guy didn't know the first thing about females. You had to show them who was boss, and then you were okay.

"What kind of a dame are you married to?" Marty asked.

"She's okay, we get on pretty good. There was just this little argument we had—"

"You scared of her?"

"No, no. But five hundred—it's a lot of money."

"You better take lessons how to handle your wife," Marty said drily.

Arnold studied the floor and looked sick. Marty got a sour feeling. "Look," he said. "Suppose I drop this whole business. Then you go home and lie to your wife, that'll make you feel good, huh?"

"I feel lousy. I lost five hundred bucks. Isn't that enough?"

"The hell it is." Marty's eyes practically bored into the thin narrow skull. "Five hundred bucks—that's not the end of the world. Think I want to waste my time so you can cover up for a few lousy bucks?"

"What do you want me to do?" Arnold asked shakily.

"Come clean with her. Then the both of you get here tomorrow morning early and tell me about it. I want to make sure you work it out."

Arnold's mouth opened, and he took a long slow breath. "I'll

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try, I'll tell her everything. And I didn't know there were cops like you, that would take the trouble to—that is—"

"Get the hell out of here," Marty said coldly.

He watched Arnold leave and close the door. If the boys ever found out what Marty had done, they'd kid the pants off him. He grimaced, picked up the paper with the circles, and studied it. He could make better circles than that, he just needed a little practice.

When he came home he rattled his key in the lock until he heard footsteps inside, and that eased up his jitters a little, knowing she hadn't run out on him. He opened the door and walked in, and there was Edna standing in the middle of the room. She was tense and anxious, and those eyes of hers were pleading with him.

"Marty," she said, "I'm sorry."

He didn't want her to see the relief in him, so he turned away and peeled off his jacket. "It's nothing," he said. "Those things happen."

"No. Marty, I don't care what you are or what you do. I felt awful all day. I've—"

A kind of tremor went through him. "I didn't have such a good day, either," he said. He kept his back to her while he took off his holster. "Blowing my top like that." He made a business of putting his revolver out of the way, up there on the top shelf of the closet. Without turning around he said, "Funny thing, this afternoon. Guy came in and said somebody held him up and took five hundred bucks off him. Only the guy made up the whole story."

"Why?"

"Trying to put something over on his wife." Marty finally swung around. "Look, honey—you and me, we don't want to put anything over on each other, do we?"

"No, of course not." She gave him a peculiar stare, and he could tell she was waiting for him to come over to her.

"This man who made up the story," she said. "What did you do about it?"

"Do?" he said. "Bawled the hell out of him for wasting my time. You don't think I went soft, do you?"

"No," she said slowly. "You didn't go soft."

He frowned with the intensity of the effort to get behind her words. Because she meant a lot more than she was saying, he was pretty sure of that much. But then, he supposed he meant a few things he wasn't saying too. So maybe now they were even.

Until next time.

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a NEW Inspector Maigret SHORT NOVEL by

GEORGES SIMENON

first publication in the United States

You couldn't expect Maigret to be happy about it. Here was this notary, this wealthy lawyer of Chateauneuf-sur-Loire, a Monsieur Motte, interrupting Maigret's vacation and mesmerizing the famous detective into giving up his well-earned rest and his puttering in the garden in order to investigate the thefts of valuable ivory miniatures. The notary, so calm, so polite, so deliberate, obviously took his personal responsibilities with extreme seriousness: he had no right, he said, to destroy the happiness of one of his three daughters by forbidding her to marry; on the other hand, he had no right to let that daughter marry a thief—if it was the fiance who had stolen the ivory curios. But surely these weren't Maigret's responsibilities. Didn't he have some rights?—to a little peace and quiet with Madame Maigret?

But Maigret was to learn (as you, the reader, will) that in a curious way the simple thefts of ivory carvings could become more moving than all the gory crimes with which the Police Judiciaire were so often concerned . . .

One of Georges Simenon's strangest stories—full of atmosphere and enigma and characters who will haunt you . . .

INSPECTOR MAIGRET AND THE MISSING MINIATURES

by GEORGES SIMENON

Nobody could have looked more remote from adventure or from the slightest possibility of the unforeseen than

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Inspector Maigret in the garden of his country home this July morning. The garden was surrounded by a low wall and beyond that flowed the Loire.

Everything seemed to be giving off a transparent heat haze which rose like steam in the sun—the rough, white-washed walls covered with espaliers, the flowerbeds watered the previous evening, the rows of pale lettuces, the bell-shaped glass cloches covering the melon plants. Even the drowsy flies seemed to have difficulty moving in the heavily laden air.

With his pipe between his teeth and an old straw hat on his head, Maigret in holiday mood was blissfully threading his way through a bed of tomatoes, so ripe that they dropped in a bright red pulp on the ground.

Suddenly he raised his head, surprised at first to hear a car making its way down the lane which led nowhere in particular. He became even more astonished when he heard this car stop outside his door.

He turned toward the kitchen where he could make out Madame Maigret in the blue shadows. He saw that she was as surprised as he by this event and was standing still with a saucepan in her hand.

The copper doorknocker was already banging on the door. With familiar movements Madame Maigret untied the strings of her cotton apron and did up her bun of hair.

Maigret did not want to look as if he were going to meet the visitor. He stayed where he was in his garden, listening to the doors opening and closing.

He heard steps, first on the gray flagstones of the passage, then in the dining room, and finally, his wife's voice.

"You'll find him in the garden."

There was only a rectangular patch of shade close to the house and in this rectangle stood an iron table and a green-painted bench. On the wall hung a towel beside an enamel wash basin for washing one's hands after gardening.

Maigret came slowly forward, and screwing up his eyes against the sun, made out a man of fifty or sixty, dressed in black, with an air of extreme and almost excessive correctness about him which reminded Maigret of certain important magistrates.

"I'm sorry to disturb you while you're on holiday," began the stranger, putting his bowler hat on the table and mopping his forehead, which was crowned with thick white hair. "I am Motte, a notary of Chateauneuf."

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And with a little smile which seemed automatic and which Maigret was often to see on him later, he added, "Oh, you certainly haven't heard of me. I, on the other hand, have heard a lot about *you*."

"Sit down, won't you?"

"Thank you. I've come—ahem—I might as well say it at once and get rid of an irksome duty, mightn't I? It's not a very pleasant request to make of a man whom one finds, like the philosopher, smoking his pipe in his garden.

"Yet I'm here to ask you to be so good as to leave the garden and the house for a few days and during that time to come and stay with me."

Twice now he had shown his strange smile which was really only an automatic lifting of his lip. Perhaps in this way he was trying to make up for his chilly, solemn manner.

Madame Maigret had gone indoors again without making a sound and had probably gone upstairs to put on a clean dress. Her husband guessed she had because the bedroom window was wide open and he could hear her opening the wardrobe.

"I know that when you began your holidays you didn't expect to set up as a private detective. But I've come to ask for your help as an exceptional favor. I'll explain the situation to you as simply as possible and you can decide."

He closed his eyes a moment as if to put his ideas in order and Maigret sensed that here was a man used to explaining himself clearly, who even derived a certain satisfaction from listening to himself speaking.

"As I've told you, I am a notary at Chateauneuf-sur-Loire, about forty kilometers from here. I've never been ambitious and the look of this house and garden leads me to believe that we have something in common, if only in the simplicity of our tastes.

"In fact, I'm only happy in my own home, in the house which belonged to my parents and grandparents.

"My joy in life comes from my three daughters: Emilienne, Armande, and Clotilde.

"Emilienne is now sixteen, Armande nineteen, and Clotilde twenty-three. Only one of them, Armande, is engaged and the marriage was to have taken place next month."

Maigret noted in passing the "was to have" and, although he continued to show polite attention, this did not prevent him from watching an army of ants on the move, like a narrow river flowing over the gravel.

"I don't know whether you have any children?"

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Maigret shook his head and thought that if his wife had heard from the bedroom window, she would be unhappy for the rest of the day because of it, for this was her great sorrow.

"I have always given my daughters the greatest freedom. Indeed, what I want is to be able to trust them. And although country notaries are usually taken to be people full of prejudices, there is one question on which I have none. I mean money. In fact—"

The phrase was one of his favorite expressions, which continually reappeared in the conversation like the little mechanical smiles on his face.

"In fact, the question of preventing my daughters from marrying men without means does not arise for me. I've always said so. When the situation occurred—when Armande first met Gerard Donavent—I didn't bother to point out to her that the boy was not only penniless but also jobless. In fact—"

"Again!" thought Maigret.

"He's a painter and he's twenty-three. For the past year he's been renting a little house on the banks of the Loire. He is getting an exhibition ready for next winter and is counting on it to make a name for himself.

"Armande loves him. She refuses to wait for this exhibition before she marries him. I think she's using all her charms to see that the marriage takes place beforehand and she even attaches a sort of superstitious importance to it."

He stopped on seeing Maigret leaning forward slightly, like a man who is falling sleep.

"Am I boring you?"

"Not at all. I was watching that ant carrying a load ten times larger than itself. It doesn't prevent me from listening. You had got as far as 'a sort of superstitious importance to it.' "

All the same, Maigret was cursing this black-clothed bumbler who thought fit to violate the privacy of Maigret's garden by coming and relating his little family tales with touching detail.

Emilienne? Armande? Clotilde? So Armande and Gerard were going to get married? Good luck to them! And may Gerard's exhibition be a success! Just now Maigret was happy among his tomatoes.

"May I offer you a glass of white wine?"

"I'll have a glass of water, if you don't mind."

That was up to him but he, Maigret, was still going to have his wine.

"Now I shall soon be finished, don't worry. I hope

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I've given you the impression of a happy household, a united family filled with the joy of living. Add a final touch to the picture, a little touch of the ridiculous, and it will be complete. I am a collector."

Thereupon the notary gave a kind of faint smile, almost apologetic.

"A collector of ivory curios and statues. I have about eighteen hundred of them in my possession, some of which are extremely rare. Now, for the past month I've been noticing that things have been stolen in the house two or three times a week.

"You're probably thinking it is very impudent of me to come disturbing you about thefts which you must consider unimportant. But, apart from the fact that certain of the missing objects are worth several thousands and even tens of thousands of francs, the serious thing about this, Monsieur Maigret, is the moral effect of this stealing.

"I've thought of everything, believe me. I'm not a man who panics nor one whom you would call imaginative.

"Like me, our old cook was born in the house. Her husband, the gardener, has been living with us for thirty-two years.

"As for the little maid, I've been watching her and I'm convinced she is incapable of stealing objects which, after all, she wouldn't know what to do with.

"I also thought of my head clerk, whom you will be seeing very shortly."

Maigret gave a start but did not protest.

"I have a second clerk whom you will also see, and you will understand that my suspicion could not rest on him.

"As you can guess, there only remains Gerard Donavent and that is why I am here.

"I have no right to destroy the happiness of my daughter and this young man because of things which I may have imagined. Neither have I the right to let Armande marry a thief.

"So I hope you'll see that it's impossible for me to bring the police officially into this business."

"Where are these important ivory figures?" Maigret asked suddenly.

This time Monsieur Motte's smile was more definite, for he guessed that, from that moment on, his task would be easier.

"In my office. I mean, in my private office on the first floor. When we get there I will tell you what precautions I have taken and what traps I have laid."

"Which were of no use?"

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"Which have not prevented the thefts from taking place at shorter and shorter intervals."

"Are these things easy to sell?"

"Impossible, you might say. As soon as the first thefts had taken place, I notified all the dealers likely to buy such pieces and I wrote to several collectors whom I know in Paris and London.

"May I remind you that the marriage takes place in a month, in twenty-nine days to be precise, and that I am getting more and more worried as the date approaches."

"Have you spoken of these thefts to your family?"

"Only of the first, for at that time I thought someone had inadvertently moved the thing. Since then I have said nothing."

"These curios, do they take up much room?"

"They are of different sizes, but I'm especially interested in the miniatures. Some Chinese curios are no bigger than a nut and yet they contain several finely carved figures."

"One more question: does your thief choose the most expensive pieces?"

"Yes."

"Are they easily recognizable?"

"On the contrary, it is very difficult to determine whether such and such an ivory is of great value or whether, on the other hand, it is an ordinary piece. Now the only other thing I had to tell you—"

Maigret thought: "He's going to talk about money!"

Not at all. The notary from Chateauneuf pursued his line of thought without allowing himself to be diverted from it.

"—is to tell you how, in my opinion, you ought to set about it. It's obviously necessary that you should live in the house for a while. And also that you should arouse no suspicions. So, because of this, I cannot introduce you as the famous Inspector Maigret."

It rarely happened that the Inspector ever made fun of people, but this time he could not resist the impulse to joke. It was probably Monsieur Motte's complete self-possession which caused it. He ventured to remark in all seriousness: "Perhaps I could wear a false beard?"

But the notary did not allow himself to be sidetracked and pretended not to have heard.

"I shall introduce you at home, therefore, as an old Army friend, a friend who has come from a town a long distance away. What town do you know especially well?"

"What about Bergerac?" suggested Maigret.

"All right. You are a friend

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from Bergerac. Monsieur—what name do you suggest?"

"Legros?"

The strange thing was that Maigret did not take the matter seriously at all. He replied solemnly, but inwardly he was laughing at the plan being outlined.

"Can you drive?"

"A car? No."

"That's a pity."

"Why? Must Monsieur Legros have a car?"

"Oh, it's absolutely necessary. You'll see why. I drive. All my daughters drive, even the youngest who is not yet entitled to a license. My first clerk often uses the car, and so does Gerard."

"And I must be able to follow him," growled Maigret. His eyes were smarting by dint of keeping them fixed on a procession of ants which had attracted his attention.

"We'll settle that some other way. Since you can't drive you'll have to have a chauffeur. My friend Legros can quite well have a chauffeur. By the way, what will Legros' profession be?"

"Whatever you say."

"A profession that you can talk about with some knowledge."

"Wholesale timber merchant? I've always dreamed of being a wholesale timber merchant, because of the freshly sawed planks."

"All right. So I will take you to Orleans. We'll hire a chauffeur-driven car. You will arrive a quarter of an hour after me and—"

It was then that Maigret wondered whether he was dreaming.

In a daze he looked at this little man as if he were seeing him for the first time, this little man who had enlisted his aid in a few minutes with a kind of mesmeric calm.

Then he wondered whether his wife, who had come downstairs to the kitchen again, had been listening to the conversation.

Finally, in order to gain time, he emptied his glass and tapped the bowl of his pipe against his shoe.

"But—" he began.

He was at last beginning to realize that he had almost allowed a spell to be cast on him. Now it was too late, it seemed, to destroy the whole structure so skillfully built up by the solemn notary from Chateauneuf.

"I suppose," the notary was saying, "you will not take long to get ready? You will have to take a suitcase with a few changes of clothes."

He looked Maigret in the eye and Maigret had to face him.

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This was the decisive moment. Maigret could quite easily have come out with: "For goodness' sake, don't talk nonsense!"

Instead he stood up to go and dress.

"The point is . . ."

"Just think—Armande is getting married in twenty-nine days' time!"

So what? Did he, Maigret, know this Armande who was in love with her Gerard? Was he, Maigret, the one who collected ivory miniatures?

Here he was at home, in his garden with his straw hat on, and the strip of shadow moving gradually forward over the ground, becoming narrower and narrower on the side nearest the wall until, at midday, there would be nothing left at all.

"I know a garage which will give us a good chauffeur."

Monsieur Motte suspected nothing! There he sat, on the bench, looking at the tips of his polished shoes, and about to say, "What are you waiting for?"

But Maigret was making his way to the kitchen.

At his first glance he saw that his wife had heard, for she began to shake her head vigorously from side to side.

"You're not going!" was what she was saying by her action.

And he, without knowing why—at least, without being able to define why—answered in the same way, but by nodding his head up and down.

"I am going!" was his reply.

Then aloud: "Come upstairs with me and get my suitcase ready."

On the stairs she scolded him. "And I've cooked you a veal stew."

But in the bedroom she had to keep quiet for Monsieur Motte could hear them through the open window.

Maigret leaned out to have a look at him. He did not know why, but he was impressed by this funny little man's self-assurance, by his deliberate way of talking and his extreme politeness.

"Emilienne, Armande, and Clotilde," Maigret muttered.

"Is that the reason you're going?"

She was not really as jealous as she sometimes appeared to be. And the proof that it pleased Maigret was that he smiled and shrugged.

But, then, when he looked at himself in the mirror, he pulled a face at the thought of becoming Monsieur Legros. Monsieur Legros from Bergerac. Monsieur Legros, wholesale timber merchant.

He was trying to imagine the dining room where he would soon be having lunch, surround-

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ed by people whom he did not know and who would pick him to pieces out of curiosity.

Soon he was ready and went downstairs to find Monsieur Motte still in the same place.

"I suppose it won't be necessary for us to speak too familiarly to each other?" Maigret growled, as if to have his own back for having been so complacent.

"No. After such a long time . . ."

"Where did we do our military service?"

"I did mine at Orange, with the Spahis."

It was incredible, but there it was: this bleak little man had worn the dashing uniform of the Spahis and had careered round the streets of Orange on an Arab horse!

"The Spahis it is, then," said Maigret. "After all, there's nothing to prevent me from having been a Spahi too. As long as you don't expect me to get on a horse."

But apart from the automatic smile, these jokes brought no reaction from the notary from Chateauneuf and he waited politely until they were ready to go.

Madame Maigret brought the suitcase which Maigret had lugged around in the course of so many official inquiries. He felt like addressing this poor old case and saying to it, "Well, old girl, they make us do some funny things in our job . . . Now you belong to Monsieur Legros and—"

Madame Maigret was asking, "When will you be coming back?"

"In a few days' time, Madame," intervened Monsieur Motte. "I promise to send him back to you soon, for I'm quite sure he won't be long discovering the truth."

"Thank you very much!" said the Inspector under his breath.

He climbed into Monsieur Motte's car and the notary, getting into the driver's seat, felt obliged to say, "You've nothing to be afraid of, I never drive fast."

"I don't mind at all if you do."

They soon arrived at Orleans where they stopped in the market square opposite a garage. While the notary went in, Maigret took himself off to a café which served the best brown ale in the whole region.

"Emilienne, Clotilde, and Armande," he recited. "No. Armande comes in the middle. Emilienne, Armande, and Clotilde. It'll be amusing to see whether they look like their father."

For, deep down, even though he grumbled and wished

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his notary to blazes, he was nevertheless curious to see this house which had belonged to the father and grandfather of Monsieur Motte, with the study on the ground floor and the private office on the first floor and also a garden—since there was a gardener—and see the septuagenarian cook and the young maid who were beyond suspicion.

"That's odd!" he remarked to himself. "He hasn't said a single word to me about his wife. Perhaps she's dead."

Monsieur Motte had come out of the garage where he had hired a car and chauffeur and was looking about for Maigret. Not realizing he was being watched, Motte betrayed a certain amount of anxiety and so forgot his nervous smile.

Finally, he caught sight of Maigret sitting outside the café and informed him that car and chauffeur would be ready in a quarter of an hour.

The Inspector took advantage of this to have another glass of ale and sat smoking his pipe in the sun at his little marble-topped table.

"Supposing the house turns out to be gloomy and the daughters ugly—"

Two hours later, passing out of the brightest dining room he had ever seen and following Monsieur Motte into the drawing room, where he was offered a box of cigars, he gave up treating the whole thing as a joke.

He would probably have been very surprised to have been told that he had been there only an hour and a half and yet that very morning he had never even heard of Emilienne, Armande, and Clotilde.

It was Emilienne who handed him a cup of coffee with a pretty little bow, smiling at him in her own special way.

Clotilde lowered the blinds in order to screen off the hot afternoon sun.

In the diffused light Armande was beautiful. Hers was a simple, fresh beauty, natural and seemingly unstudied.

"If you prefer your pipe," murmured the notary.

Of course he preferred his pipe! But he did not want to smoke it because of the three girls and Madame Motte, who was sitting in an armchair, smiling pleasantly.

For there *was* a Madame Motte, a quiet, self-effacing woman who seemed to wander through life with a dreamy smile.

"Two lumps?"

"Just one, if you don't mind."

Hundreds of times, on passing those large elegant

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houses, standing on the banks of the Loire, Maigret had said to himself: "Life must be pleasant and easy in there, surrounded by beautiful things."

The house of the notary from Chateauneuf was the country house *par excellence*, the kind they used to build in days gone by with no meanness or flashiness, with nothing ugly or aggressive.

Tufts of grass grew between the stones of the courtyard. Sometimes you could hear a heavy cart going slowly down the narrow road outside.

The paneling on the walls was of light wood with just the right patina, and when one moved about the drawing room, it set the crystal pendants of the chandeliers quietly tinkling.

"In a moment, my friend, if you would like it, Armande will entertain you with some music. But I think she prefers to wait until her fiancé arrives. Do you like music?"

Of course! Why not? But Maigret had never had time to listen to much.

"Do you like Schubert?" Armande asked as she turned over the pages of an album.

"Of course, Mademoiselle."

He did not call her Armande yet, but he felt that would come and he would soon be saying Emilienne, Armande, and Clotilde as if he, too, belonged to the family.

His glance sought out the thin figure of Monsieur Motte silhouetted against the pale gold of a blind. He caught the familiar tic, the familiar elusive smile.

And he was sure that, in this way, the notary of Chateauneuf was saying to him: "You see, I didn't lie to you."

Of course not. It was this perfect setting that was disquieting. So that Maigret had the impression that he was being imperceptibly drawn into a world that was too nearly perfect, too happy, where there was no place for the human failings with which he had been occupied for so many years.

It was then that it came to him. He suddenly started as if, here, in these gentle and peaceful surroundings, he had caught sight of an evil, repulsive thing—a scorpion, for instance, or a reptile.

Someone had been stealing!

And these words, which meant something mild at police headquarters, at the Quai des Orfevres, this offense, which was all in a day's work in the life of a policeman used to dealing with all the other forms of crime, took on a new meaning in this setting.

Someone had been stealing!

Was this little devil of a little

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notary reading the thoughts in his eyes? Maigret caught a sudden expression of sadness on his face.

Someone had been stealing!

It was rather as if someone had deliberately defiled and desecrated a beautiful thing. As if, for example, they had attacked Emilienne's innocence by treating her like a street girl, or again as if they had smeared dirt on the perfect pier glasses in the room, smashed the grand piano, or slashed the Persian carpet with its incredible blues.

Someone in the house had been stealing!

And Maigret almost wanted to apologize to his host for the jokes he had made in the morning.

For he had just discovered that the simple thefts of ivory curios could become more moving in certain circumstances than all the gory crimes with which the Police Judiciaire were so often concerned . . .

The notary's brass plate was not fixed near the main doorway which was flanked by two stone posts, but the office had its private entrance a little farther on. You could distinguish the office windows from all the other windows in the house by their panes of green glass.

They had not finished coffee when Armande gave a little jump on hearing steps in the road.

Gerard Donavent might have saved himself the bother of ringing for his fiancée recognized his footfall at a distance. However, a solemn deep-sounding bell echoed in the porch and without paying attention to anyone else, the girl jumped up and went to open the door.

She came back glowing, accompanied by the young man, as if she wanted to say to Maigret, or rather to Monsieur Legros: "You see Gerard is worth falling in love with!"

What further embarrassed Maigret was to feel Monsieur Motte's insistent stare on him. And it embarrassed him all the more because, when Donavent came in, he had been unable to repress a start of surprise.

Donavent was magnificent—a tall young man in his prime, with a face tanned from open-air life and with clear eyes. His bearing was graceful. Without respect for formality, he was wearing a thin sweater which made him look even more athletic.

"Gerard, may I introduce a friend of my father's, an old Army friend, Monsieur Legros, who has come to spend a few days with us."

The two men shook hands vigorously. They looked each

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other straight in the eye and Maigret felt the young man's gaiety give way for a second to anxiety.

"How do you do," Maigret said.

As he was going back to his seat the Inspector noticed that someone was missing from the drawing room—the youngest of the sisters, Émilienne, who had gone silently out of the room.

As for Clotilde, she said, "Armande was waiting for you before sitting down to the piano. She's been studying that piece by Schubert that you like all morning."

Why did Monsieur Motte's expression still seem to be saying: "Well? What's your impression? Have you noticed anything?"

Maigret made him a little sign which the notary understood.

"You'll excuse us for not listening to the music this afternoon. My friend Legros has some rather important matters to discuss with me."

They climbed a stairway so perfectly polished that it reflected people's shortened silhouettes as they walked. Monsieur Motte stood aside to let Maigret in.

Before him stretched a huge office with narrow windows opening on the sun-baked courtyard and on an extension of the garden. Here one could still see the swing and playthings used by the girls when they were children.

The office furniture was of unrelieved ebony, but it was at once apparent that this was in order to set off the hundreds of ivory curios arranged in the glass cases covering the walls.

"I guessed that you had something to say to me," said the notary, pulling up a fawn-colored leather armchair for his guest.

Alas, from now on Maigret could no longer enjoy the quiet and perfect taste of this house without mental reservations, a house where such ingenuity had gone into maintaining order and happiness.

He avoided looking at his host.

"On the contrary, I thought it was you who perhaps had a few details to add to the information which you confided in me this morning," Maigret responded.

The opening sentences of this conversation would have been difficult for anyone listening at the door to have understood.

The notary said, "You know Gerard?"

Maigret answered, "You guessed it then?"

"Yes, I know the young

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man," Maigret said.

The notary said, "He was the one who told me everything. I did not want to influence your judgment. I still wanted to see."

It was almost a trap and Maigret understood better now the strange feeling he had in Monsieur Motte's presence.

"Did this young man tell you his real name?"

"Gassin, yes—Gerard Gassin."

"Did he tell you that his father was better known under the nickname of 'Commodore' or the more famous one of 'the robber of Dutchmen'?"

"Yes, he did. When I told you this morning that I had no prejudices, I had in mind something far more significant than you could imagine . . . As a matter of fact, I don't believe that the son of a thief must necessarily be a thief. The frankness with which Gerard confessed to me, here in this office, won my sympathy. And now I think that you really are in possession of all the facts you need for your inquiry."

His nervous tic was not a smile but a quick grimace.

"I'm leaving you absolutely free. I promise not to try to influence you in anything and I will accept your verdict, whatever it is. It was only with this understanding that I called in a man like you."

Why, in addition to the emotional side of the situation, was there also present a side which Maigret was not yet able to define, a sense of disquiet, almost of discord?

Three times Maigret had arrested the Commodore. He was an extraordinary man, though, who only frequented big houses and elegant company and who, with a crook's peculiar mania, confined himself exclusively to bankers and Dutch wholesale merchants.

Was it because businessmen are often naive? Or merely because after a successful first coup, the Commodore had thought it unnecessary to change his tactics? Was he perhaps superstitious?

He was a handsome man, as strong and tall as his son, but more refined in his attire and with a halo of pure white hair. He chose his victims in the Pullman cars between Amsterdam and Paris, and his swindles were so perfectly managed that it had been possible to bring him to trial only once.

"Do you know where the Commodore is now?" asked Maigret, lighting his pipe.

A nod from the notary.

"Gerard told me. For the past two years his father has been living the life of a wealthy man in a villa he has had built at San Remo. But Gerard was

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determined to be independent and he has never consented to profit from an illegal fortune.

"Now do you understand, Monsieur Maigret? Excuse me, Monsieur Legros? It's better to get used to the name, even when we are alone. Do you see the tragedy of my case? If this young man is sincere, if he is honest, I risk discouraging him forever by my suspicions, as well as breaking my daughter's heart. On the other hand, if I am being taken in—"

This time he gave a thin smile which was full of bitterness, as if to explain: "What's the good of a life like mine, a constant striving to attain the kind of perfection which you see around you, if I am to end by letting a crook into the house?"

Maigret went downstairs afterward by himself. He had asked if he might do so. For some time now neither the sound of the piano nor the voice of Armande had been heard.

He was surprised to find Emilienne in the drawing room alone. She gave a start on seeing him come in.

"Are you looking for my sister and Gerard?" she said.

"Well . . ."

"They're walking in the garden. I think Armande had a bit of a headache."

What sort of conversation could he have with Emilienne? As a boy, Maigret had had no sister and his female cousins lived on the other side of France. As a young man, he had hardly had anything to do with girls and he had chosen for his wife precisely somebody who was as uncomplicated as possible.

Finally, during the years he had spent at police headquarters, he rarely had to have anything to do with young ladies of fifteen or sixteen who had been brought up in such a genteel way.

Emilienne disturbed him with the bold yet timid way she looked at him, and with her figure in which there was still something of the child but already much of the woman.

"I'm going out for a walk as well," he said carefully.

He passed by the old gardener who was raking over a path in which the pebbles were brighter than the ones Maigret had in his own garden, and he thought of asking the gardener where he got them from.

As he approached a rose bower he caught sight of Armande wiping her eyes with a handkerchief that was not hers, for she immediately gave it back to her companion. Furthermore the couple did not show any surprise or embarrass-

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ment in the presence of Maigret. On the contrary, as he was going to continue his walk it was Armande who called him back in a still tearful voice.

"Monsieur Maig—" she began.

He went into the bower of leaves and roses through which tiny rays of sun were filtering.

"I'm sorry—it just came out. I'll be more careful, I promise. I should like you to talk to Gerard, or rather listen to him. In the car you'd be at his studio in a few minutes. Wouldn't he, Gerard?"

And, indeed, a few minutes later Maigret was getting out in front of a farmworker's renovated little cottage. It stood alone on the banks of the Loire.

Inside, most of the walls had been removed to make a large studio; it received daylight on three sides and all the furniture was made from local white pinewood.

Easels stood about in the middle of the room and the walls were covered with sketches or partly finished paintings.

"So you knew who I was?" asked Maigret, sitting down on a stool.

"Your photo appeared in the papers at the same time as—" Gerard began.

As the Commodore's, of course! Maigret remembered.

At the time he had been annoyed that thieves and murderers had been put on their guard against his heavy profile.

"I confess," continued the young man, after a brief silence, "that I was expecting a surprise of this kind. Monsieur Motte is only doing his duty, after all.

"As for Armande, she is so sensitive, so intuitive, that she suspected what was happening as soon as you arrived.

"When I confirmed her suspicions, she wept, in spite of herself, for she is a woman. She has an over-simple idea of policemen and she is ready to believe you are going to arrest me without any more ado . . .

"What can I offer you? I've some quite good beer and I seem to remember—"

Maigret said, "How long has Mademoiselle Armande known who you are?"

"Since the first day. Well, the third day—that was the day when I realized I loved her . . . You know that Monsieur Motte brings his daughters up without too many restraints. She came here to see my pictures.

"I told her the whole truth and promised to repeat my confession the next day to her father. I may add that she hesitated and that, if I had listened to her, I probably

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would have put off this confession."

"In your opinion, how many ivory figures have disappeared from the notary's study?"

"Don't think I can't see the trap that lies behind your question. Monsieur Motte revealed only the first theft to his family in order not to be hampered in his investigations.

"But I've already told you Armande is extremely intuitive. She was quick to realize that other thefts were being committed. You had better know, then, that every day she found means of making a discreet inventory of the collection and so we know all that's going on."

"Of course, because of your profession and your art studies, you are in a position to determine the value of the different pieces in the collection?"

"So much so that I pointed out to Monsieur Motte number thirty-three in his catalogue which is obviously a German copy. After writing to the British Museum he had to agree that I was right."

Maigret drank his beer which was cold, for there was a refrigerator in a corner.

Although the poky little cottage was quite plain, it was comfortable and its elegance owed nothing to interior decorators or antique dealers.

"From what I can see," he went on tentatively, "you paint mainly portraits."

"Actually, I use local people for models. If I go on doing this, it won't be long before they'll all have passed through this studio."

"Has Mademoiselle Armande ever sat for you?"

Gerard looked slightly uncomfortable and said no, but with less frankness.

"And this picture of the girl in pink. Isn't that Mademoiselle Emilienne?"

"It is. All right. I'll tell you the truth."

Gerard began to tell Maigret why he had never painted Armande and why there was a picture in his studio of her sister Emilienne.

"In the beginning I hesitated to ask Armande to come to my house alone. I found this excuse of her sister's portrait to avoid any gossip. Then, when a chaperon was no longer necessary—well, the picture was put aside . . . A little more beer?"

Then, suddenly sitting down on a table opposite Maigret, he said, with the glass in his hand, "You're probably wondering why I brought you here? I can assure you it's not to make out a case for myself. And it's not to show you all the nooks and crannies of my home in order to prove to you that the stolen

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ivories are not here. I may say that I'm never sure that they're *not* here. And every night and morning I carry out a proper search of the house myself . . ."

"You're afraid that—?"

"I'm not afraid of anything. I'm almost sure that the sole aim and object of the person who is taking so much trouble to steal unsaleable pieces is to compromise me and prevent my marriage.

"One day or other this person will find some means of bringing proof against me by having one of these damned curios discovered, carefully hidden away, in my own house."

"So, you are convinced that the aim and object of the thief is to prevent your marriage?"

"I've been unable to find any other explanation. It's been going on for a month now and I've had time to think over this problem.

"I know you well enough by reputation to be sure that you've already got the hang of the place, as they say. Monsieur Motte lives only for his family and his collection. Consequently he is rather unwilling to introduce strangers into the house. Very few friends ever come.

"That explains why the oldest girl, Clotilde, has not yet received a single offer of marriage at the age of twenty-three."

"What are you leading up to?"

"This: my suspicions cannot apply to a very large number of people. Only one man, the head clerk, who is twenty-eight and is named Jean Vidier, can see Armande often and also gain access to Monsieur Motte's study on his own."

"So?"

"No, Monsieur Maigret! It's not what you think. I know I must seem like a guilty man trying hard to throw suspicion on an innocent person. Besides, this conversation wouldn't have taken place if it weren't a question not only of my happiness but of Armande's.

"I'd say—and I'm not any less discerning than anyone else—that this Jean Vidier, who's good-looking and ambitious, wouldn't say no to becoming the son-in-law of the notary of Chateauneuf and perhaps one day taking his place in the business.

"I might add that for the past two years he hasn't missed a single chance of seeing Armande and that, on these occasions, his looks deliberately spoke volumes. I'm saying that I have the right and even the duty to stand up for myself.

"I've been into this business with more concern than you

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have, of course, but also with a closer acquaintance of the household and its comings and goings.

"I'm not trying to hoodwink you or get you on my side. What I want is for this business to be cleared up. It has become intolerable."

Maigret took advantage of the silence to light a fresh pipe and help himself to some more beer. He made a mental note that he must ask Gerard where he got the beer; beer like this was rarely to be found in the wine-growing districts.

"You think it's Jean Vidier, then?"

Why did Gerard look uncomfortable again?

"No, Inspector. I don't want you to start off on a preconceived idea. Look, I'll be perfectly frank with you. Before I came here, I wondered if this Jean Vidier didn't have the chance of a lucky break—not perhaps the chance of a grand passion. But Armande is too much alive, too eager for a full life, to remain single for very long . . . In a few years she would probably have accepted the offer of a simple, quiet courtship."

"Don't you think this clerk might have had designs on Clotilde?"

"Oh, no. Clotilde is prouder than her sister and would have been put off at the idea of marrying someone in her father's employ. Actually, she's the only one who's given me a bit of a cold shoulder, because really I'm only a penniless artist."

"Does she know who you really are?"

"No."

"Who in the family does know?"

"Monsieur Motte and Armande. I don't think Monsieur Motte has told his wife. He doesn't confide in her much."

"And Jean Vidier?"

"So you've thought of that too. I wondered for a long time whether he knew. Now I'm certain he does. As a matter of fact, the notary, who is very meticulous, took the trouble after my confession to make a file of all the newspaper clippings about my father. Now, I saw this file one day on the desk, one morning when Jean Vidier was in there alone."

"So that, in your opinion, the case would seem obvious?"

Maigret was taken aback to hear Gerard reply categorically, "No!"

He looked at the young man in surprise and saw that the artist was embarrassed by his own exclamation.

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, Monsieur Maigret . . . I've been more interested in

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police cases than most people and you can understand why. So I've followed very closely the cases in which you have been engaged. I've noticed that you have always been fair, even to people like—like—"

"Like your father?"

"Yes. That's why I think you'll be fair to me too . . . I could have let you carry on your investigation alone but, when I recognized you, I at once told Armande I wanted to speak to you. You see, I'm impatient. In theory, I'm getting married in twenty-nine days. But actually I'm at the mercy of some event, some trick of my enemy—there is an enemy, but who it is I'm not sure. . .

"I've told you what I had to say about Jean Vidier and now I'll tell you equally frankly—Even if everything points to him, my intuition tells me that he's not the guilty one."

A bloated fly kept buzzing backward and forward between them. Through the window four people could be seen rowing in a skiff, shooting like an arrow down the Loire. In the heavy atmosphere one could only guess the "In. Out. In. Out" of the coxswain as he leaned forward.

"I told you I've been through all the conceivable explanations over and over again. I even wondered whether Madame Motte. . . . No, it's too silly. You've seen her. It looks as if her husband chose her to go with his house—quiet and affable, quite uncomplicated. You see, Motte has a very high ideal of happiness and all his life he has striven hard to create and maintain it for himself and his family and those who surround him.

"I haven't yet had much experience of the world myself, Inspector . . . I'm young.

"But I've mixed with all sorts of people and I've never come across such intense desire for harmony in the smallest things."

Maigret was all the more disturbed because he recognized in these words an echo of his own thoughts, but expressed more vigorously.

"If I knew that what I'm going to say could go beyond these walls I would bite my tongue off. Again, I trust your sense of fair play. It's a question of defending a love which I swear to you is good and sincere. At my age it is difficult to believe in human wickedness and that's why I was almost ashamed to speak to you just now about Jean Vidier. I tried to find another explanation. And that's even worse. Suppose Monsieur Motte—"

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Maigret started and then tried to sit quite still and expressionless.

"Suppose that this man who uses so much intelligence, taste, and determination to cling to the kind of happiness that he has worked out for himself, suppose he suddenly fears that an intruder, an outsider, is worming his way into his family, like a maggot in fruit . . . And suppose that on no account will he go against his principles, that he wants above all to remain, in the eyes of everyone, a man known for his broadmindedness and tolerance . . .

"That's the conclusion I came to. I've nothing more to say. I can't imagine any other explanation of a situation which seems so absurd that I sometimes wonder whether I haven't taken leave of my senses . . ."

While he was speaking the last few sentences he had stood up and walked up and down the studio. Without thinking what he was doing, he had opened the table drawer.

Then it was that he picked up something, an object no bigger than a nut, and he tossed it carelessly over to Maigret.

"Look! What did I tell you?"

It must have been the rare piece that the notary of Chateauneuf had mentioned—a tiny piece of ivory inside which an oriental craftsman had succeeded in carving a minute scene with six figures.

Maigret held the tiny ivory carving in the palm of his hand, pleased to feel the smoothness of a material which had been polished by ten or twelve centuries.

"Now it will be easy," Maigret said to Armande's fiancé, "to find out who came to your house."

"Oh, will it?" The young man gave a short laugh.

"Has Monsieur Motte been here during the last few days?"

"Last night he was here with his three daughters . . ."

"And Jean Vidier?"

Gerard hesitated. It would seem that this last confession was worrying him.

"I've no servant," he said at last with a sigh. "A daily woman comes every morning for two hours to do the cleaning. I eat at the inn."

"I don't see—"

"My daily woman, Mathilde, is Vidier's aunt. He comes from a very humble background. It's surprising he's not more bitter. I've nothing further to add. I'll drive you back."

"If you don't mind, I'll walk."

"Just as you like. But I must take the car back."

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Maigret found himself alone in the streets of Chateauneuf which the sun at this hour divided into almost equal sections: light and heat on one side, with perhaps a cat or a sleepy dog; cool shade on the other, with businessmen sitting at ease.

"What did he really mean?" he wondered.

Yes, had Gerard Donavent been trying to set Maigret off on the track of the notary or of Jean Vidier?

All this time Maigret was walking round the covered-in market square which looked like a deserted skating rink. "In that case," he muttered, "he is even cleverer than his father."

So clever that—

There wasn't the slightest suspicion of a body in the affair. No human life, it appeared, was in danger. The case was concerned with happy people who worked unceasingly to protect their happiness.

And now, by the merest of chances, this striving for happiness had ended in the theft of oddly shaped objects brought over from China by traders and purchased at an outrageous price by a man with a mania for collecting.

What did it all mean?

Then Maigret noticed that he had unconsciously slipped into his pocket the little piece of ivory which, to collectors, was worth tens of thousands of francs.

He stood in front of the gate, in between the two stone pillars. With real pleasure he made the solemn full-sounding bell echo inside.

The little maid opened the varnished door, stood aside, and then announced as she closed it again: "Everyone is in the garden."

Maigret nevertheless went into the drawing room where he knew they would meet together after dinner that evening. He placed the ivory curio on the table with a green delicately veined marble top. Then he wondered whether he should not go to the study and meet Jean Vidier.

He was doubly disappointed. He could not really have said how he had imagined Vidier, but in any event the reality did not correspond to any idea which he might have had of the man.

In spite of the green windowpanes which reached a third of the way up the windows, the study was as light as the rest of the house and all round the walls were posters announcing the public sale of farms, agricultural implements, livestock, and fatstock.

Only one piece of furniture belonged to another era and

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that was a tall desk of black wood, flanked by its stool with peculiar shaped legs.

But one glance at the occupant of this stool was sufficient explanation: the second clerk in the study was a gray-haired old man wearing a black silk cap. He looked as if he had stepped out of an etching of the previous century, even down to the linen oversleeves.

He did not take the trouble to turn round when Maigret came in.

Jean Vidier, on the contrary, jumped up quickly, bowed and smiled and bowed again, not knowing how to do Maigret the honors.

"I am—" began the Inspector.

"I know, I know! Monsieur Motte warned me."

Warned him of what?

How would he really describe this young man? He was so commonplace that it was disappointing.

He must have been a good boy at school and even a model pupil; certainly, during that time, he must have been his teacher's favorite and been held up as an example. It was surely he who did all the little jobs in class like filling the teacher's glass with water, sharpening the pencils, and cleaning the blackboard.

A "deserving young man" in the full sense of the word whom you could equally well imagine running a youth club or taking Boy Scouts out into the country in the summer. Who knew? Perhaps he belonged to an amateur dramatic group and he'd be sure to have an appealing baritone voice.

Clean, neat, and well groomed, always ready to devote himself to a good cause, ready to bow and say thank you, ready in fact to make himself useful and agreeable.

"Of course," he was saying, "I am entirely at your service . . . Will you excuse me a minute?"

He added a signature to a document which he handed to his fossilized colleague and indicated to the Inspector by the appropriate mime that he would like to speak to him anywhere but in the study.

"Let me show you round," he said. "As a wholesale timber merchant I am sure that will interest you and—"

They stood in a little corridor where there was a spiral staircase. The young man's tone of voice changed and he said with less assurance, "Do you want to go upstairs? The boss is in the garden. . ."

And Maigret could see that the top of the little staircase led

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straight into Monsieur Motte's study.

Jean Vidier walked round as if he were at home and showed Maigret to the leather armchair which he had sat in earlier.

"I'd like to tell you, Inspector, that the moment you arrived I guessed who you were. In any event, I knew the boss wanted to call in a private detective. Recently, I've found newspapers open at the small ads with crosses by the side of advertisements for private detective agencies. So you see?"

He was terribly proud of his discernment. He did not for one moment imagine that Maigret was not at all flattered to be compared with private detectives in newspaper advertisements at twenty francs a line.

"You see, I've been quite fair with you! I could have pretended to swallow this timber-merchant story. As I've said, I'm frank—too frank probably, for it's not always wise to show one's true feelings."

"Why are young men like this so unattractive, with their bursting self-assurance," Maigret wondered as he watched him.

"So I know why you are here. And I must tell you at once as plainly as possible: Inspector, be careful! The person who called you in thought he was doing the right thing. But has he any idea of what you might find? You've seen a happy, contented household. What would you say if some sudden drama were to bring it sorrow?"

Napoleon, in the most fateful moments of his life, could not have looked more important than this young man who had impudently installed himself in his employer's armchair and was nonchalantly playing with a paper knife.

He did not seem to mind whether he received an answer or not. He was entirely carried away. Probably ever since morning he had been going over his speech so that he could get it off pat—with quick glances from time to time at a window-pane in which his image was reflected.

"You must realize," he went on, "that I know nothing definite. Apart from that I know my place well enough to behave responsibly. But for ten years I've been Monsieur Motte's right-hand man. I can even go so far as to say that for some time now I've been the one who has kept the office going. I'm also responsible for all the confidential correspondence involving the collection which you see around you. So—"

And this "So" meant: "So make no mistake about it, don't

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take me for an ordinary employee! I've no idea what you've been told about me but now you know my position."

"Excuse me," began Maigret. Up to now he had not been able to open his mouth.

"One moment . . . I must tell you that in my heart of hearts I believe this investigation to be not only useless but also dangerous. Suppose you were called away on business at a moment's notice—there'd be nothing to worry about."

"Thank you very much!"

"I'm not trying to hurt your feelings. But I know the household and you don't. And you'll have to take the responsibility for what happens if you persist and if by some lucky chance you were to succeed in—"

He probably was not being deliberately spiteful. A spiteful person would probably have been incapable of finding, in so short a time, so many words which could wound the Inspector.

No. He was merely a brash young man who was pleased with himself. He believed in himself, in his worth, in his judgment, and probably also in his honesty.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'd rather that what I've just told you should be kept to ourselves. Mind you, it's only a request. There is nothing to prevent you from repeating to Monsieur Motte all that I've just said and, I'll say it again, you'll only have yourself to blame if—"

"I know," Maigret sighed. His head was spinning.

"What *do* you know?" the notary's employee asked Maigret.

"Nothing, Monsieur Vidier. I know that I know absolutely nothing and I thank you for your kind intervention."

"So?"

"So nothing. I suppose, by the way, that you haven't been amusing yourself by stealing the ivories yourself?"

"Do you suspect me?"

"No, no. Calm down."

"Because, if so, I should prefer to put the matter in the hands of the local police at once."

He was all red and perspiring.

"I suppose also that, apart from your little speech, which has made the deepest impression on me, you have nothing of importance to communicate to me?"

"Absolutely nothing!"

"Well, you see, we understand each other perfectly. Our little talk is at an end, Monsieur Vidier. You may go."

"But—"

"I said that you may go."

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"Are you staying in this office?"

"If you don't mind. And I should like to stay here alone."

"Well—"

Vidier stood up reluctantly and said again, "Well—"

"Goodbye, Monsieur Vidier."

"Goodbye, Inspector."

Maigret could scarcely wait for the door to close before giving way to uncontrollable silent laughter.

Contrary to what he had just said, he had nothing to do and did not even have the curiosity to look at the ivory pieces: there were so many of them in the glass cases that it made him feel ill to look at them.

He contented himself with filling his pipe and lighting it. Then he went and stood in front of the open window: from there he could see, in the distance, the pebbles glinting in the pathways.

"I mustn't forget to ask him where he gets such good pebbles."

His own garden was much smaller, of course. His house was too. And he hadn't three daughters. Like this strange Monsieur Motte.

Emilienne, Armande, and Clotilde . . .

The menu for dinner, without being unnecessarily extravagant, was perfectly chosen down to the smallest detail; the table was immaculately laid and Monsieur Motte knew how to choose wines for his cellar.

Gerard Donavent was present and Maigret guessed that the young man was one of them like this every evening; that ever since he became officially engaged, a place was laid for him at the last meal of the day.

For this occasion the artist had put on a town suit and a white shirt which showed up his dark skin. If she could have seen him dressed like this, Madame Maigret would surely have found a likeness between him and some young film star.

No one had yet gone into the drawing room and the Inspector supposed that his little ivory must still be sitting on the green-marble table.

Monsieur Motte had rather more color than he had in the morning, for he had just been lying in the sun in the garden, where drinks had been served.

As for Maigret, the blood had rushed to his head, a thing that often happened to him nowadays after walking about on a hot day. Donavent's beer probably had something to do with it, even discounting the ambiguous situation in which he found himself.

After all, who was still taken in by the timber-merchant-Army-friend fiction?

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Neither Gerard nor Armande. Nor Jean Vidier.

At the very most, then, there remained Madame Motte, who did not seem to be bothered about anything, and Emilienne and Clotilde.

And yet these two girls had a way of looking at their guest that made him feel uncomfortable, especially when the notary forced him to talk about his timber business.

Maigret rather felt as if he had unwisely gone into an exclusive china shop where there was just room for him to edge his way round by holding in his stomach and by avoiding the slightest movement of his arms.

At midday he had been impressed by the discreetness and good taste of the luxury which surrounded him. In the evening he was already beginning to have enough of it and he promised himself the pleasure of smoking his pipe after dinner in the drawing room.

Let them get on with it! Why had they come and fetched him, after all? Gerard and Armande were in love!

So Monsieur Motte really had no objections and kept on filling his glass cases with objects which Maigret found almost hideous and, in any event, useless. It was almost as if the Inspector had filled his own cupboards with tin soldiers.

They made him turn up in a car with a chauffeur! They fitted him out with a different name and a different vocation.

And the first thing that everybody took care to do when he saw them in private was to say to him: "This farce isn't put on for my benefit, is it? I know perfectly well who you are and what you are doing here."

And yet . . .

He could not have explained what he felt, but he was impressed in spite of everything, as if he had caught a whiff of drama in the air.

He could not altogether fathom this notary of Chateauneuf, who was as quaint and polished as his ivory figures, with his hardly perceptible tic which must mean something.

Was the notary making fun of everyone? Was there another person hidden under this enigmatic exterior?

In any event, he did not take his eyes off his guest and sometimes his glance implied a pathetic question.

As for Armande, she preferred to look at the Inspector as vacantly as possible, for then her face automatically assumed a pleading look, as if he had been appointed the arbiter of her destiny.

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"That girl," thought Maigret, "would follow her fiancé to the ends of the earth, even if he had stolen all the ivory figures in the world."

And Gerard—the only one who had really talked freely—was his good humor put on or was it natural to him? He had the same easy manners as his father, the same well-bred elegance which had helped the Commodore to find his victims among the stolid Dutch bankers.

Only a quick glance from time to time, like someone looking at a barometer in passing, merely to make sure that nothing sensational was happening in Maigret's direction.

Clotilde was ordinary, like her mother. The best thing that could happen for her would be to marry and have three or four children in the midst of whom, without any complications, she would find perfect happiness and, in any event, peace of mind.

As for Emilienne . . . She was too young—or too knowing for her age. You could hardly treat her as a little girl any longer and it seemed silly to treat her as a young lady.

Maigret noticed that she wasn't eating. He also registered the fact that no one was taking any notice of it, which showed that she was the spoiled child of the house and usually had her own way.

She had a long pale face, large green eyes, and fingers so long and thin that Maigret kept looking at them in spite of himself, for he had never seen anything like them before.

"Tomorrow," announced Monsieur Motte, "you will be able to go boating with my daughters on the Loire. I am sure that Gerard will want to go with you."

Why didn't they make him play blind man's buff or some other childish game while they were about it?

"I'll see," Maigret said.

"Of course, you are quite free to go where you like. I merely wanted you to know that we have a motorboat and a boathouse down by the water."

Maigret wondered: "Is he trying to get me out of the way? Or does he want to point out to me that perhaps there's something in the boathouse I should investigate?"

They rose from the table. As always, there was a certain amount of moving around just before going into the drawing room and everyone made polite remarks to each other. So that, in the end, it was Emilienne who went in first and walked over to the table to ring for coffee.

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When Maigret made his way over to this table, the ivory figure was no longer there.

And when he turned round, he saw Emilienne kissing first her father on the forehead, then her mother. She then came and gave him a formal nod and omitted saying good night to the others.

"She always goes to bed early," explained Armande, handing the Inspector a cup. "One lump, isn't it? Father told me that you insisted on my playing the piano."

The girl had been playing for perhaps half an hour when the Inspector began to make a move, although he was apprehensive of disturbing the springs in the armchair or treading on a creaking board.

As he left the drawing room it looked like an Eighteenth Century print, with its chandelier and the family seated like wax figures.

For a long time now the Inspector had noticed—when he looked out into the courtyard—a pool of light which shone down from the first floor and which must be the reflection from the windows of the notary's private room.

The piano was still playing when Maigret crept upstairs and turned the doorknob.

At his first glance he saw Jean Vidier seated behind his employer's desk. Round his head hung a cloud of smoke from a cigarette, the ash from which threatened to fall on the documents he was studying.

"What is it you want?" Vidier asked without getting up.

Maigret shut the door.

He understood from the attitude of the young man that he was used to working like this in the evening in the notary's study, where Monsieur Motte would come and join him

"I have a fairly urgent bit of work," went on the head clerk with some show of impatience.

"Will it take long?"

"I'm waiting for Monsieur Motte in order to finish it and it will take us a good part of the night."

"That's a pity."

"Why?"

"Because you won't have the time to work so long."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Have you a telephone? Yes, I can see it. Fancy this now—I'm going to ask the police at Chateauneuf to be so good as to come and put you under arrest."

"Me?" Vidier had stood up, dazed with astonishment. "Me? You want to have *me* arrested?"

Luckily the piano was still playing and it drowned his indignant voice.

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"But of course! . . . You must be aware, Monsieur Vidier, that in the matter of theft, complicity is just as much an offense as the theft itself. Now, complicity can consist of the simple fact of allowing the theft to be committed and not saying anything about it."

"But—"

"Let me finish. You know who stole your employer's ivory figures."

Vidier laughed mockingly.

"They've never been stolen!"

"That's just what I mean. Let's say that you know who displaced your employer's ivory figures. You were well aware that these disappearances could be very prejudicial to someone. I mean, they risked destroying his happiness."

"No!"

Vidier was growing angry. He stared at Maigret defiantly.

"Look, Monsieur, you mustn't think that you can impress me with your threats! Armande was quite determined to follow her lover anywhere if Monsieur Motte had not given his consent. I know because I heard her say so."

"To whom?"

"To Gerard! So, you see, there is nobody's happiness at stake. As for the ivory figures you know perfectly well that they will be put back some day, since nothing can be done about it. Besides . . ."

"Besides what?"

The piano, which had stopped playing a moment, began again more quietly, and a voice reached them, that of Armande, rather a faint voice singing a Schubert song.

"Besides nothing! As for arresting me . . . Supposing I told you that I'm ready, that I'm waiting for your policemen? Now admit that you wouldn't dare telephone! Own up that you're not on the right track, Inspector Maigret!"

Maigret answered simply, "You're right."

It was this calmness that made the head clerk's anger subside and also took away his self-assurance and bravado.

"What do you mean?"

"I said you're right. You can't be charged with complicity."

"Why not?"

"Because you cannot be an accomplice to an offense or crime which does not exist."

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do, my friend. You know quite well, you who must be familiar with the legal code, that the charge of larceny is not preferred when it takes place between members of the same family."

The young man collapsed as quickly as he had lost his

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temper. Now he was miserable and ready to cry. He looked at Maigret like a boy who has just had his ears pulled.

"Who told you?"

"Who did you expect it to be? Not Madame Motte, surely?"

Vidier nodded.

"Not Clotilde either. She isn't nasty enough. You mustn't say anything against Mademoiselle Clotilde. If only there weren't difficulties in choosing the right girl . . ."

Maigret understood that Vidier would prefer to have been in love with the oldest of the Mottes rather than the second oldest, Armande.

"You see, there's no one else," he said. "Only Emilienne."

"She's not responsible," the clerk muttered.

"Did I say she was responsible? I think she's not even twenty-one, is she?"

"She's full of romantic ideas. One evening I surprised her with an ivory figure in her hand and she swore to me that if I mentioned it to anyone she would kill herself."

"It's her youth."

"To kill herself?"

"To *say* she would! To be in love as she is in love! To be as jealous of Armande as she is—jealous to the point of causing the object of her love to be driven away rather than see him happy with her sister.

"And what an idea—to take her as chaperon and have her portrait painted."

"So they told you?"

In the same instant Vidier sat up, listening. Then, rushing past Maigret so quickly that he almost knocked him over, he opened the door and slammed it shut behind him.

A few seconds later, a scuffle was heard from the next room. Then, suddenly, there was a shot, followed by a heavy silence.

Downstairs the piano had stopped . . .

The night was warm in spite of the open office windows which let in the scents from the garden. From time to time you could see in the distance, on the main road, a lighted car traveling at full speed.

In the road, in front of the doorway with its two stone pillars, Maigret's car was waiting: its lights were on and the uniformed chauffeur was standing on the pavement.

Monsieur Motte was very pale. His nervous tic was pulling his lip up more often than ever and he was making a determined effort to give the impression of a smile.

"I'm sorry, Inspector. But everything's turned out all right

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this way, hasn't it? It's all much better than if—"

He did not complete his sentence. He was trying to hold back a tear.

"I wanted to know at any price . . . And I never suspected that, after all, it was only a young girl's romantic love.

"I'm old and Emilienne is very young: that probably explains why, although I spoiled her, I understood her less than her sisters."

He turned toward Jean Vidier who was sitting there in a corner, not yet recovered from his emotional upset.

"If it hadn't been for you, my good Jean—"

"Not at all, Monsieur. I am sure she wouldn't have fired the shot. When I heard a noise in your room I immediately thought—I don't know why—that it wasn't you. Mademoiselle Emilienne had just taken the revolver from your bedside table. I rushed at her and I was the one who fired the gun during the struggle. I'm sorry about your mirror."

Then, after a glance at Maigret: "If Monsieur Maigret had not come here—"

Monsieur Motte finally managed his little smile.

"If my friend from Bergerac had not come here," he corrected.

He did not complete his thought. On the desk were spread out the missing pieces of the collection which Emilienne had given back after keeping them hidden in her linen closet.

Monsieur Motte stood up.

"Tomorrow I will have a new mirror put in." Perhaps he was going to speak of the cost, then thought better of it.

"Tomorrow, also, Monsieur Maigret, I'll send you a fee. I'm too tired this evening. I'm sorry you insist on leaving so soon."

An hour later Madame Maigret switched on the light as soon as she heard the door open suddenly, and she heard Maigret's gruff voice call out as he came upstairs: "It's only me!"

"Have you found that queer old man's ivory thingumajigs already?"

"Oh, yes."

"Where were they?"

"I'll tell you all about it later."

Maigret was still so soaked in the atmosphere he had left behind that he could hardly believe he had only left his house that morning.

And that night he dreamed, not of bright, shining pebbles, but of the three daughters of the notary of Chateauneuf—Emilienne, Armande, and Clotilde. . .

(translated by Mary Scudamore)

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a *NEW* crime story by

ROBIN MAUGHAM

first publication in the United States

Robin Maugham inherited the title of Lord Maugham in 1958; he is the son of the late Viscount Maugham, once lord chancellor of England, and the nephew of the late W. Somerset Maugham. Signing his work as Robin Maugham, he has achieved an international literary reputation despite (perhaps partly because of) serious wounds sustained when the tank he commanded in North Africa was bombed in 1942, serious injuries sustained during the Agadir earthquake of 1960, and serious family disapproval when he chose a writing career. His first novel, THE SERVANT *(1948), became a memorable film starring Dirk Bogarde; his other novels include* LINE ON GINGER *(1949),* THE SECOND WINDOW *(1968), and most recently,* THE WRONG PEOPLE *(1971). His habit is to write in longhand in a large exercise book, and he "delights in browsing around antique shops and bookshops, is devoted to opera, and finds relaxation in long walks and in reading"...*

FOLLOW THE SUN

by ROBIN MAUGHAM

One evening a year ago I went into a Chelsea pub where a man was playing the piano. He was obviously a professional and he was playing with wild brilliance because—as I soon noticed—enthusiastic customers were pouring drinks down his throat to refresh him for the next number, as if he were a human jukebox.

I moved closer to look at him. He was about 30, with a sensitive face and wide-set staring eyes. He was wearing a stained tweed jacket and faded corduroy trousers. He needed a shave and a haircut, and from

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the nervous tic that twisted his face I reckoned he also needed a month in a nursing home.

A fat man with a smooth face was leaning against the top of the battered piano. He winked at a girl with obviously dyed hair who was holding his arm, and turned toward the bar.

"Another drink for the maestro!" he called out in a loud voice.

Then he bent down to the pianist.

"Play *Follow the Sun*," he ordered.

The pianist glanced up at him and began playing *Buttons and Bows*.

The girl laughed.

"I said, *Follow the Sun*," the fat man said crossly.

The pianist stared up at him dully and went on playing *Buttons and Bows*. Now and then his fingers slipped on a complicated run, but he had a wonderful sense of rhythm.

"It's the smash hit from that show at the Royalty. You must have heard it," the fat man insisted.

The pianist did not look up.

"I don't play to order," he said.

"No play tune, no get drink. Isn't that right?" the fat man asked, turning to the people clustered round the piano.

"That's the form," one of them said with a titter.

"I'll play any other tune you like."

"What's wrong? Don't you know *Follow the Sun?*"

The pianist looked up.

"Know it?" he asked scornfully. "You fool, I wrote it!"

"Don't try to kid me," the fat man said. "Maxie Palmer wrote it, and you're no more Maxie Palmer than I'm the Prime Minister."

"I wrote that tune all the same."

"Naughty, naughty," the fat man said. "We mustn't tell fibs, must we?"

Suddenly the pianist crashed his hands flat onto the keyboard.

"I wrote it!" he shouted. Then his head tipped onto his hands, his shoulders began to shake, and he started to mumble in a low trembling voice.

"He's drunk," the fat man said.

No one else spoke. In the silence we could hear some of the words the pianist was muttering: "Smash hit. . .smash hit I was certain. . .but she stole it. Joan stole it and sold it to him. She must have. She was the only one who'd ever heard it—there was no one else. . .And she was the only girl I ever loved."

The barman walked over and stood beside him.

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"Shall I get you a cab?" he asked quietly.

Slowly the pianist raised his head and nodded. The barman helped him up and they walked out of the swing doors together.

When I went into the pub a fortnight later neither the drunken pianist nor the fat man was there. A placid woman in a green blouse was thumping out *Tea for Two* with her foot on the loud pedal. Glass beads clinked round her neck.

I walked across to the bar and ordered a pint of bitter. Standing next to me at the bar was a small stout woman clutching a glass of port in one hand and a shopping bag in the other. Her gray hair was crimped into tight curls over her broad head. She turned to me and smiled confidingly.

"I always think there's nothing like the old favorites."

"Nothing," I agreed.

"Now take that new show at the Royalty," she said, waving her glass in the air. "I expect you've seen it?"

"Not yet."

"Well, there's only one tune that's worth anything in the whole show. And do you know who wrote it? My Doreen's son, George. And do you know how old he is? Seven last birthday."

I decided that she was tipsy.

"You wouldn't believe a kid like that could write a tune, would you?" she asked.

"It's a bit surprising," I said cautiously.

"I thought you'd say that," she said triumphantly. "You see, I was working for Mr. Max Palmer at the time. I'd come in for two hours in the mornings to do his place. And my Doreen works fulltime in a shop, so I'd have to take young George along with me in the holidays when he wasn't at school. Not that he was any trouble. He'd just sit downstairs in the kitchen whistling to himself and not worry anybody. I've never known a kid so keen on music. And that's how it all came about."

"I don't understand."

"Well, one day Mr. Palmer came down to the kitchen to get some ice cubes out of the fridge. And there was young George whistling. Of course, Georgie stopped as soon as Mr. Palmer came in, but Mr. Palmer must have heard the tune because he asked Georgie to go on with it. So Georgie whistled it again.

"And Mr. Palmer went running upstairs to his piano to write it down. The next day he gave Georgie a pound note. But he's a mean one, that Mr. Maxie Palmer. Because do you know what the tune was? *Follow the Sun.* I swear it."

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I stared at her as she drank her port. The muttered words of the young pianist slipped back into my mind. "Joan stole it and sold it to him. She must have. She was the only one who'd ever heard it—there was no one else."

But was there no one else?

I ordered drinks and made myself wait until the barman brought her a glass of port before I asked her the question which was haunting me.

"Did you ever work for another composer, a young pianist about thirty?" I asked, and described as best I could the drunken pianist in the pub.

"Why, that would be Mr. Corrie," she said. "Such a nice young gentleman, he was. I was really sorry to leave him. But he just couldn't keep me on. 'Mrs. Roach,' he said, 'I'm down and out and that's all there is to it.'"

I tried to keep my voice steady as I asked her my next question. "When you were working for Mr. Corrie, did you ever take young Georgie along there with you?"

"Why, heaps of times. Of course, Mr. Corrie's place wasn't anything like Mr. Palmer's—just one great big room with a piano in it and a kitchen and bathroom downstairs. But Georgie would be that quiet when Mr. Corrie was playing he never worried him. I told you Georgie liked music. Sometimes he'd sneak upstairs while Mr. Corrie was playing and sit there all morning, and Mr. Corrie wouldn't even know he was in the room."

At last I had got it. Corrie believed that Joan was the only person to whom he had played his tune and that only Joan could have sold it. But he'd played it to another person—someone who stayed curled up so quietly in a corner of the sofa that Corrie had never even noticed him—a small boy with an ear for music who had unconsciously picked up the tune and whistled it to Max Palmer and had been pleased to get a pound note.

I sank down my drink.

"Can you remember where Mr. Corrie lived?" I asked.

"I should . . . yes, it was Number Seven Elvering Mews. Runs off Smith Street."

"One more question, Mrs. Roach. What's your address?"

She fished in her shopping bag and produced a soiled card.

"I always keep them handy," she said. "But can I ask why you want it?"

"Because I think it's just possible that Mr. Corrie will be very grateful to you," I said.

And so will a girl called Joan. I thought, as I walked round to Elvering Mews.

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a *NEW* detective story by

PATRICIA McGERR

A new "type" of detective story? . . . Further comments after you have read about "a dying message" that points to all the suspects in general but to one, and only one, in particular . . .

THE LAST CHECK

by PATRICIA McGERR

Stephen Coleman was alone in his study. A checkbook lay open in front of him, a stack of bills near his left hand. He looked at the top bill, checked the column of figures, and frowned his disapproval. Waste, he told himself, sheer waste. Doesn't anybody but me know the value of money?

Stephen Coleman was a rich man but a careful one. A joint checking account had encouraged the extravagance of his first wife and he had not made the same mistake with his second. Instead it was his custom to examine the monthly accounts and personally pay every bill. Tonight he had no choice but to pay the exorbitant grocery bill. Tomorrow he would make sure that both his wife and their cook understood that such profligacy must cease.

His pen was poised over the check when a metallic click drew his attention to the study door. It opened and a familiar figure entered. "Still up?" he said in mild surprise. "I thought everybody was—" Then he saw the weapon in the gloved hand and his eyes widened in shock. "You're not—you can't—"

But a glance at the other's face told him protest was useless. He barely had time to scribble his name at the bottom of the blank check before the gun blazed and the pen dropped from his hand.

The killer hurried to the victim's side to place the gun in his hand and curve his finger round the trigger and then, after a quick appraisal of the objects on the desk, ran from the room. The shot roused the other occupants of the house and they came with haste to the

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study. The murderer also returned to mingle with the others and join in their expressions of horror and disbelief at the apparent suicide. One of them phoned a doctor who, in turn, summoned the police.

Coleman was pronounced dead on arrival. While the lab squad took pictures and collected physical evidence Captain Rogan roamed the study.

"Look at this." He called his aide's attention to an alcove lined with books. "The man was a real fan."

"Mysteries, huh?" Sergeant Pringle looked over his shoulder. "If the killer read them he'd have known better than to try to pass off a death as suicide when the gun was too far away to leave a powder burn."

"Unfortunately, however, he—or she—knew enough about fingerprints not to leave any on the gun except the corpse's. These aren't just mysteries, though," Rogan added. "Have you noticed?—they're all by the same author. Ellery Queen. Why, there must be more than fifty! You read any of them?"

"Sure I have." The sergeant scanned some of the titles. "He's the one whose victims often leave dying messages that finger the murderer. Too bad Coleman didn't take a leaf from these books and write us a clue."

"I think he did," the captain said. "Okay, Ernie." He nodded to the photographer. "If you've got all the angles they can take the body away."

Rogan moved back to the desk and stared at the blank check which Coleman had used his last few seconds of life to sign. "He was trying to tell us something. The question is—what?"

A short time later, with the body removed and the technical men gone, Rogan sat in the dead man's chair and studied the two men and two women who were ranged in a semicircle on the other side of the desk. Three of them lived in the house: Blanche Coleman, the new-made widow; her stepson Desmond Coleman; and the cook, Eva Rojack. The fourth, a guest for the weekend, was Ralph Frampton, treasurer of Coleman Enterprises, Inc.

Each told substantially the same story. They were all in their rooms, all in bed at the time of the murder. Frampton said he was studying a financial report he intended to discuss with his employer the next day. The others claimed they were asleep until the sound of the shot wakened them. They put on robes and slippers and converged on the study. It was

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a time of excitement and confusion and no one was clear on the order in which they had arrived there.

In any case that was not a significant point, since the study was on the second floor at the end of a corridor onto which all the bedrooms opened except that of the cook. Her room connected with the kitchen and was almost directly below the study. Every one of them could, as they said, have heard the shot and come to investigate. Any one of them might have fired the shot and ducked back into his or her own room—or, in the cook's case, down the stairs—to emerge again with the others.

"All of you," Rogan summed up, "had equal opportunity. The weapon belonged to the deceased and was regularly kept in an unlocked drawer of the desk. Presumably all of you knew it was here and could have slipped in during the day and taken it. So we—"

"I did not!" the cook interrupted. She was a dark angular woman in her middle forties whose English was precise though slightly accented. She had answered the captain's questions with distrustful brevity, but mention of the gun made her, for the first time, voluble. "I know nothing of a gun. I have nothing to do with guns. I do not wish to be in a house with one."

"Really?" Rogan gave her his full attention. "You sound as if you'd had some bad experiences with firearms."

"In my own country—" She shivered, cut off the sentence. "But that was long ago. I do not want to remember it."

"What is your country, Mrs. Rojack?"

"I am of Bohemia. But no more, not since I was a child. Now I am United States citizen. And I do not want to live where there are guns."

"I see. Does anyone else deny knowledge that the gun was here?"

"I knew Steve had a gun, of course," Frampton volunteered. "He talked about getting it last year when there were some robberies in the area. But I had no idea where he kept it."

"How about you, Mrs. Coleman? You knew there was a gun in your husband's desk?"

"Certainly I knew." A plump pretty blonde, she leaned forward and the mauve chiffon wrapper opened to reveal a matching nightgown whose décolletage furnished ample evidence of her attractions. "He was very nervous about the robberies and even made me learn to shoot. But that was months ago. I'd forgotten all about it."

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"And you?" The captain turned to the bearded young man beside her. "Did you—"

"Sure I did." Desmond didn't wait for him to complete the question. "I knew he had it. I knew where he kept it. I knew how to use it. But I didn't shoot the old man, even though I had good cause."

"What was your cause?"

"The usual," Desmond replied carelessly. "He didn't dig my lifestyle. But if you're sniffing for motives there are plenty lying around." His glance flicked to Frampton. "Like maybe the account books didn't quite balance."

"That's not funny, Desmond," the treasurer snapped.

"So who's joking? You weren't invited for a weekend of fun and games. All afternoon the two of you were holed up in here going over figures. And the way the old man was shouting at you made it clear he didn't like the way you added them up."

"The last quarter showed a loss," Frampton conceded. "But that's not my fault. And certainly there's no question of dishonesty."

"If you say so," Desmond shrugged. "Anyway, it'll all come out in the audit." He switched his malice to his stepmother. "How about you, Blanchie? You so hot for your Latin lover that you decided to anticipate the divorce with a bullet?"

"Why, you sneaky little insect! How do you—" She turned on him furiously, then broke off to resume in a more moderate tone. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Be frank with the fuzz," Desmond advised kindly. "They'll find out anyway. All the neighbors know about you and Angelo. I think even Dad was catching on and then you'd have been out on your tail without a dime. Now you can have both love and money. Isn't that neat?"

"You're insufferable," she said angrily. "Since you find it so amusing to spread suspicion, why not tell about the quarrel you had with your father at dinner?"

"I've already admitted we didn't get on."

"Didn't get on," she echoed scornfully. "That hardly describes the ugly scene at the table. Don't you agree, Mr. Frampton?"

"He put up with a lot from you, Des," the older man corroborated. "But you finally pushed him too far. I think he meant it when he told you he was through supporting an ingrate."

"What was it he said?" The widow showed satisfaction in

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remembering. " 'You've had your last check from me. From now on you earn your bread or you don't eat.' "

"Motives for everyone." Desmond was undaunted. "Except Little Eva." He turned to the cook. "How about it? Are you part of some dark Bohemian plot to avenge your honor?"

"You always like to joke," she told him solemnly. "I think when your papa is dead is wrong time for joking."

"Speaking of time—" The captain checked his watch. "I don't think we'll learn any more tonight. So you can all go back to bed. I'll talk to you again in the morning."

He stood in the doorway to watch as Mrs. Coleman, Desmond, and Frampton walked down the hall to their rooms and the cook vanished down the backstairs. Then he returned to the desk.

"Not much forwarder, eh?" the sergeant commented. "Think there's anything in what the son said about Frampton fixing the books and the wife having a boy friend?"

"We'll find out," Rogan promised. "Meanwhile we have this." He fingered the signed blank check. "I'm sure he's told us who shot him if we only knew how to read it."

"It doesn't make sense," Pringle argued. "If he had time to write a name, why didn't he put down the killer's? Oh, I know how it is in the books on the wall." He gestured toward the Ellery Queen corner. "The dying message is always a puzzle that only the wiseguy private dick can figure out. But Coleman wasn't writing riddles. He wanted his killer caught. So why make it hard for us?"

"For the same reason the dying message in the books has to be obscure—so the murderer won't destroy it. Do you think whoever shot Coleman would have left behind a paper with his or her name on it for us to find?"

"No, I guess not." The sergeant frowned. "If the boy were called Stephen Coleman, Junior, the name on the check would mean something. But his name is Desmond. And the last name can point to either the son or the wife, so that's no help, unless—say, what about the fight at dinner? Coleman could count on somebody telling us about that, maybe repeating what he said to young Desmond about the 'last check.' This is a last check, all right."

"Could be." Rogan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "At least, we're moving in the right direction. It's not *what* he wrote but what he wrote it *on* that's significant. A check.

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What does that make you think of?"

"My wife," Pringle answered promptly. "She's the runaway check writer at our house."

"Maybe here too. That is, Coleman wrote the checks, but we'll probably find most of the bills he was paying were hers."

"That's reaching for it," the sergeant demurred. "He also paid bills for the boy. And the top one there is from a fancy grocer, which could point to the cook. But she's the only one nobody dredged up a motive for."

"Which doesn't prove she hasn't got one," Rogan pointed out. "How are you at geography, Ned?"

"I know where the precinct lines intersect," he answered. "What are you getting at?"

"There's no such country as Bohemia any more," Rogan explained. "It's now part of Czechoslovakia."

"You mean the lady's a Czech?" He looked at the slip of paper in the captain's hand. "Well, what do you know? He really was leaving us a message. But why would the cook—"

"Not so fast," Rogan cautioned. "There's somebody else among the suspects to whom a check has a special application. What's a big part of a treasurer's job?"

"Writing checks," the sergeant answered glumly. "Hell, Captain, Coleman may have thought he was handing us a clue, but what's it worth when it points to everybody in the house?"

"It can't be that broad," Rogan countered. "He was saying something very specific. If the check itself, the piece of paper, was the vital clue, he didn't have to take time to sign it. Any kind of mark—an x, a circle—would have called our attention to it as his last message. But he rushed to sign his whole name on it before he died."

"Maybe not," the sergeant suggested. "Maybe it isn't a dying message at all. Coleman was sitting here paying bills. He might have signed the check before the killer came in."

The captain shook his head. "Coleman had a firm neat signature. This one was written in such a hurry it's barely legible. Besides, nobody puts his name on a check before he fills in the rest of it."

"My wife does," Pringle said. "It's a bad habit and I keep warning her that some day somebody will get hold of one of her signed blank checks and write in any amount he likes. But you're right. A man like Coleman would never be so unbusinesslike."

"That's it!" Rogan ex-

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claimed. "You've hit it, Sergeant. *A signed blank check!* That's the dying message."

"Yeah, I know." Pringle was puzzled by his superior's enthusiasm.

"I think you'd better knock on Mrs. Coleman's door and tell her I'd like to see her. She's probably not sleeping yet."

His guess was confirmed by the speed with which the sergeant returned with the widow.

"I don't understand," she protested. "Of course I want to help in every way I can to find whoever killed my husband. But what have you to ask me that's so important it can't wait till morning?"

"I have something to *tell* you," he corrected her. "And it's very important. I'm about to charge you with your husband's murder and I must inform you of your right to have a lawyer—"

"I don't need a lawyer!" she exploded. "You can't charge me. You have no proof, no evidence, nothing but the word of that spiteful boy."

"Was he lying about—what was the name?—Angelo?"

"So I have a friend," she admitted. "But that doesn't say I killed my husband."

"We have your husband's word for that," the captain told her. "He didn't have much time before he died, but he had enough to identify you as his murderer."

"You're bluffing," she said. "He didn't write anything about me."

"He wrote this." Rogan held out the check. Reluctantly, with eyes narrowing and lips pressed tightly together, she moved closer to the desk to examine the piece of paper. As she looked at it the worry left her face.

"Yes," she said triumphantly. "That's all he wrote. His own name. Nothing at all about me. Do you think I'm so stupid I'd have left—oh!" She cut herself short. "You're trying to trick me. But I'm not going to answer any more questions."

"I have no more questions," Rogan told her. "I just want you to get dressed and come with us to headquarters."

"But that's crazy! All you have is his own signature. How can you call that a message about *me?*"

"Your name is Blanche, Mrs. Coleman," Rogan answered. "That's why your husband signed this check. He wanted to give us a piece of paper that is blank except for a signature—in other words, a *carte blanche.*"

(please turn to next page)

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EDITORIAL NOTE: Is the story you have just finished a parody or a pastiche of Ellery Queen? Or is it a new form, a new variation, of "parody-pastiche"? We asked the author, Patricia McGerr, to give her views, and here is what she wrote to us: "Since talking to you I've thought a bit more about the category to which my story, *The Last Check*, belongs. It's not parody or pastiche since the Famous Detective isn't present either in caricature or in carbon. Nor is the intent, as in the stories by Robert L. Fish and Jon L. Breen, comic. But its ancestry is clear. For while there are many Ellery Queen stories with no dying message, the thought of a dying message automatically brings Ellery Queen to mind.

"So what I really attempted was a straightforward account of two EQ *readers* (the victim and the detective). It seemed logical that a man steeped in the EQ canon would, if about to be killed, leave a cryptic clue to the identity of his murderer; and that, of course, required an investigator of similar literary taste, to recognize and interpret the dying message."

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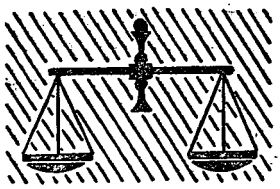

THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Professionally speaking, it's a pleasure to report, spring develops well. The postman, less capricious than usual, has favored me with so many worthy new items that this month and next month, at least, I need not gripe to high heaven or fall back on some masterpiece from the past. And, since these books fall more or less into the categories I should have requested if I had been allowed to order them, let's proceed.

Though listed as "suspense" (I wish they wouldn't), *Season of Snows and Sins*, by Patricia Moyes (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $4.95), is in fact a sound, ingenious detective novel of the classic pattern, with strong characterization and vivid atmosphere. As narrated by three very different women—Jane Weston, sympathetic English widow; beautiful, too-careless Sylvie Claudet; our old friend Emmy Tibbett, wife of Detective Chief Superintendent Henry Tibbett, Scotland Yard—blackmail and murder disrupt a Swiss ski resort bulging with guests.

Orphan Anne-Marie, whom everybody likes, has married a fledgling ski instructor. Then all good omens turn sour; the marriage ends with a brutal knifing in which Anne-Marie herself seems the only possible culprit. From bakery to four-star hotel, from Jane's bleak chalet to the luxury flat of the French cabinet minister, every corner of Montarraz shakes with conflict.

Accompanying his Emmy on a visit, Superintendent Tibbett accepts the challenge; pull-sleuth, pull-murderer for their ding-dong tug of homicide. And, though less showily displayed than in some earlier stories by Miss Moyes, all the clues are there.

Oliver Bleeck's *The Procane Chronicle* (Morrow, $5.95) brings back Philip St. Ives, professional go-between in the recovery of heisted loot, for another superior thriller, bound New York to Washington, along the outer fringes of the law. This time our narrator must ransom the stolen diary of Abner Procane, now almost retired as the world's greatest thief, whose diary contains enough self-incrimination to jail a haloed saint.

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We meet suave, think-of-everything Procane; we meet his two young disciples, Janet Whistler and Miles Wiedstein, whom the master thief has been training for their work. After several misadventures, including a corpse at a laundromat, St. Ives ransoms the diary. But several missing pages, carefully torn away, describe a projected million-dollar heist which Procane and his disciples have not yet carried out.

Now Procane and Co. must act, swears Abner Procane, or the dirty crooks who stole that diary will also steal the m.o. Thenceforward, interrupted only by St. Ives's amorous interlude with Janet Whistler, events race to a shootout at the drive-in movie, to a wild race outside Washington, and to the gory finale at Procane's Georgetown home. Sophisticated cops and robbers.

In *Path of Ghosts*, by Robert MacLeod (McCall, $4.95), Talos Cord, trouble-shooter for the United Nations, once more takes up the espionage trail. Though nobody could regard the United Nations with any degree of seriousness, Talos Cord is a secret agent so engaging and sympathetic that we suspend disbelief to follow him.

The body of Isabella Rivas, once mistress of Revolutionary Jon Barthell, is found frozen in the Alps. Rumor whispers that Barthell, himself supposed dead after a Brazilian ambush, is still alive and making plans. Cord must learn what's up.

In Switzerland young Annalise Belin and Peter Steiger interest him in Carol Barthell, Jon's missing daughter. Certain bad guys, who have kidnapped her, instantly try to cut down Cord with a machine-pistol. After move and counter-move, during which he rescues Carol, their undercover struggle becomes open war and gunplay in the high Alps. Sophisticated cloak and dagger, but don't worry; the good guys win.

Restricted space makes it impossible for me to discuss James Mitchell's *A Red File for Callan* (Simon & Schuster, $4.95) as fully as it deserves. British Agent Callan, murderer *pro patria*, has had qualms of conscience. Was he justified in killing those his boss ordered him to kill?

Rusticated with a dreary job, he will be reinstated if he kills one harmless-seeming German whose hobby, like our hero's own, is fighting mimic battles with toy soldiers. He convinces himself that blood must sometimes flow, he outwits every enemy in a roaring tale of cloak and dagger allied to cops and robbers, with all four elements recommended.

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a NEW suspense-crime story by

CHRISTIANNA BRAND

The circumstances in Christianna Brand's newest story are not at all extraordinary—it might even be true that they are not at all unusual—not these days. They could happen almost anywhere—in a big-city apartment house, in a suburban home. There are telephones almost everywhere these days. But, as the man in the story says: "remote houses, hidden-away places" are the most likely—especially when the woman is alone . . .

SUCH A NICE MAN

by CHRISTIANNA BRAND

What a fool she'd been ever to have let him in! Why must she be always so trusting?—so stupefied by her own too-ready social instinct, never giving herself time to think. "At thirty years of age," her husband used to say to her, "surely you might have developed some common sense." And hadn't there been warning enough? Suppose this were the man who—

But it couldn't be. Such a *nice* man! So nice, he'd seemed, standing out there on the doorstep, so quiet and solid-looking; middle-aged, respectable, and behind him in the semi-darkness, the middle-aged, respectable-looking car. On an impulse, he'd said—just passing—so many happy holidays in this old house when he'd lived here as a boy.

"I ought not to trouble you." He glanced round him. "I hope the gentleman's in, is he? If not I won't bother you. It wouldn't be right—I'll go away." But he didn't come to that till he was well into the hall with the front door closed behind him.

Of course she should have pretended to call to her husband upstairs, or said that he was just bringing in some coal. But no! "Well, he's not in yet, actually. But he'll—he'll be back any minute." And helpless in the toils of her own

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convent-bred good manners she led the way into the huge old farmhouse kitchen which to them was the center of the house—moving away from him, backing away to the Welsh dresser at the far end, leaving him standing uncertainly in the doorway. "This room you'll remember, I expect? And the grandfather clock?" She felt that she sounded like a renting agent, nervously showing him around.

"Not too sure about the clock," he said—cagily? "I'd have been only a little lad the last time I was here."

"But the dresser—you remember this old dresser? They say it's been there since the house was built." In fact, they had brought it with them two years ago.

If he knew it was a test, that no longer disturbed him. He seemed to abandon himself to discovery. "Oh, well, yes—the dresser I remember," he said.

So now she knew. Her heart lurched, and a sick terror seemed to rise in her throat, almost choking her. She faltered, "I think I can hear the car. My husband's due back any minute, any second. He never leaves me here alone after dark." And she blurted it out, "There's a man—he rings me up." She felt his eyes fixed on her, direct, appraising. "He says filthy things, obscene things."

He stood very quiet, then said at last, "So you've rumbled it already. Well, yes, you're right, it was me. Only, about your husband—that's not true, is it? He won't be back till late. I was outside the window and heard you on the phone."

He had gone very pale and his broad, solid, pleasant face suddenly wore a gray dead look. He explained, almost apologetically, "I've been spying on your house, you see. Waiting for the chance."

"The chance?" she stammered.

He stood there with that dreadful gray look, a sort of blank look as though he spoke from another world; motionless, except when now and again his thick white hands gave a sudden little twitch. "I can't help myself," he said. "This ringing up and all. It's disgusting, I know, and afterwards I feel ashamed. But I can't help it. It's a sort of sickness, I suppose."

He moved in a little from the doorway, came to the end of the big scrubbed wooden table, and stood there with the table between them. She protested, as though to stem his advance with words, to fend off for a little longer the horror to come: "But why me? Why *me?* I'm not some pretty young girl—"

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"It's not personal," he said, almost as if that might be reassuring. "I've never even seen you before, except glimpses through the window now and then." And he explained it. "I just look them up in the telephone book. Different places, different counties, even—I couldn't do it too near home. My job takes me about a good deal, and that's a help. But it's more the house, first, really—"

"The house?"

"Remote houses, hidden-away places like this. I've got to be careful, you see, haven't I? I wouldn't want to be caught. I find a good house and who lives in it, and then I drive over and ring up from some local phone booth. After that it depends on how they react. Sometimes they're cool, they just say, 'You're mad,' and hang up. That kind I don't bother with any more. But if they're upset and disgusted, frightened even—well, I'm afraid it's better then."

He looked down at his hands, fisted, white and bulging, on the table before him. "Perhaps I *am* mad. It's dreadful really. But when it comes on me it's like—well, it's like I said, like a drug or something, I can't resist it. And that's why I have to be so careful, why I mustn't let myself be caught. I couldn't stand prison. What would I do, locked away in there, if the fit came on me? I really *would* go mad then."

She grasped at a faint hope. "The police here know about you. We told them about the calls."

"They can't do a thing," he said, quite kindly, half pityingly. "Not unless they was to tap the line day and night. And you're not the only one. I keep several going at a time, just for safety's sake, and I give them names made up from the names of their houses usually. 'I'll ring Lily at Pond Farm,' I'll say to myself—'lily pond,' you see—or 'I'll ring Ella at Ash Tree House.' That was a tough one—I made it up at last from Cinderella and ashes, you see, well, like cinders. But mostly I don't go to see *them;* they're just to keep the police not knowing where to watch next."

He was silent, for a moment withdrawn, musing. Then he went on in the same kindly voice.

"If they got me now, it would be for life. I killed one of the girls, you see. Accidental, it was, of course—but I killed her."

She gave a little jerked-out, chopped-off scream, scrabbling with bunched-up fingers at her mouth. "Oh, *no!*"

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"I didn't mean to," he said unhappily. "I didn't *want* to. In fact, that part I didn't enjoy at all—it all went too far. Poor thing!—such a pretty young girl she was; only she would try to run away. I'd been phoning her, you see—like you say, filthy, obscene. I don't know what makes me do it, honest I don't."

He seemed so sincerely unhappy, so truly distressed. If she could temporize, if she could keep him talking! She had said to him that she was not a pretty young girl, but she recognized in herself, without at all consciously exerting it, a natural charm which had brought her much popularity. Now she pulled out, from under the table beside him, a wooden kitchen chair and suggested, "Why don't you sit down? Would you like some tea or something?"

He gave her a sidelong look, making no attempt to sit down. "Are you trying to get round me? That won't do you any good, I'm afraid."

"Well, I wasn't," she said. "I just thought we could—well, talk. You seem to be in so much trouble."

"Yes, I am," he acknowledged. "I'm in trouble all right. You don't think I like being this way? All the worry of it, let alone the danger. And the agony, the awfulness when it's coming on and you're still at the stage of trying to resist it. I've been to the police station before now—a police station of all places!—all on some cooked-up excuse, knowing I'd be safe from it there, that I'd have to behave myself. But the minute I left I was at it worse than ever."

"You could get treatment. You're not the only one—this problem is very well understood nowadays. People do get cured of it."

"A psychiatrist, you mean?"

"You can tell a psychiatrist anything—he's a doctor, you can tell him anything. And just trying to get help, just wanting to be cured—that's a terrifically good sign, you know. It shows that you're on your way to getting better already." He stood looking at her woodenly and she gabbled on. "I mean, being able to talk about it, surely that in itself would be good?—not having to keep these terrible secrets all bottled up inside you."

"But that's it," he said. "They *are* terrible secrets. I could have gone once, but how could I now? These psychiatrists, they can get anything out of you; you can't keep things back, not once you're started. And doctor or no doctor, he wouldn't stand for me having killed that girl. He'd give me

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away and there'd be a murder charge against me."

He looked at her, almost imploringly. "If only they wouldn't struggle, then I wouldn't hurt them. I don't *mean* to hurt them but I'm—strong. And this girl, you see—I went to see her, I pretended I'd lived in the house once, I often do that if it's an old house. But—well, she wouldn't—you know—*let* me. She struggled, they all struggle, and—I suppose it's dreadful but I'm beginning to realize that it's the struggle I like."

Almost as though it had reminded him of why he was there, he began to move at last, sidling toward her round the table, his thick fingers white-tipped and spatulate, pressed along the wooden edge.

She was sick and shivering. The familiar room swam round her as though she saw it through water. She started to gibber, backed up, violently trembling, against the oak dresser. "Stay over there! Don't come near me, don't touch me!" But the sad heavy face came closer, regretful, implacable. She sobbed and stammered, "Please don't hurt me, *please—!*"

He stopped again, stood there, humbly explaining, "I don't *want* to hurt you. I wouldn't, you see, if you'd only not struggle, if you'd only be—be kind and easy. I'm just ordinary, you know, just an ordinary man. Bachelor, yes; but a lovely old mother, looks after me like a king; and I'm a good son to her too. Fine job, solid, respectable—no one ever suspects a thing. But when this comes over me . . ."

He fell silent again and into the silence, ash falling in the grate, coals resettling, sounded as loud and harsh as an avalanche. The grandfather clock struck once on a rasping note.

"If you wouldn't all struggle," he said. "But you do; and nowadays, like I say, it's becoming more and more the actual struggle that—that excites me; it's all leading up to that. It used not to be. The telephone calls—they were the thing. But now—it's a sort of revenge, I think, wanting to get the better of women because women have always seemed to—well, not like me."

"But if you do these things—"

"I wouldn't do them if they'd be nice to me. If only just once, one of them was kind—kind and easy and even a little bit loving—I sometimes think I'd be cured of it, give the whole thing up forever."

"Couldn't you get some nice girl of your own?"

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"But that's what I'm telling you," he said. "Nice girls won't have me. I suppose they—they sort of sense this other thing. I suppose I sort of—smell of it."

"There are—well, you know, the girls on the street. Poor sad girls, living so dangerously, taking such terrible risks. But—they'd be easy. And I suppose kind?"

"But not loving," he said. "And I want some love, that's what I want. That's what I go about looking for. If—if, even after all the muck and the filth, the telephone calls and all that—if one of them was really to understand and forgive, really not blame me, really accept that I'm just an ordinary man, only with this sickness that I can't help—"

He thought it over, rather pathetically. "Quite a nice man I am, really, as men go. Honest, dependable, decent—well, in all other ways. And kind, you know, considerate, good to my mother like I said. There never was a better son, I don't suppose."

"I think you *are* nice," she said. "You're quite right, you *are* nice—a nice, ordinary man. Only you're ill, you need help."

"That's right," he said. "I do need help. And what help can I look for now, except from a woman? I think if I found that, I could begin my life all over again. But till then—"

Till then! She began to move, edging her way almost imperceptibly along the dresser, her hands spread out behind her feeling their way along the polished ledge. It brought him sharply out of his absorption. He said, "That's no use, my dear. If you think you're going to get to the door and get away from me, I'm afraid that's no use. I wouldn't want to kill you, not like that poor girl. *She* tried to run away. But you—I like you, honest I do, no one else has ever been so kind as you, so understanding. But that won't stop me. Unless—" He looked at her wistfully. "If you could be the one!" he said.

She knew now what she must do. She knew there was no other way. She had pulled herself together; the room no longer swam about her; her hands grew steady, dropping from the ledge, hanging at her sides. She said, "Well—I do understand. You're ill. You can't help yourself. And neither can I help myself. Neither of us can."

And sick, shuddering, reluctant, she tore herself from the shelter of the oak dresser and went to him.

He did not stir, just stood there waiting for her. But she saw with a sort of heartbreak that his whole face was

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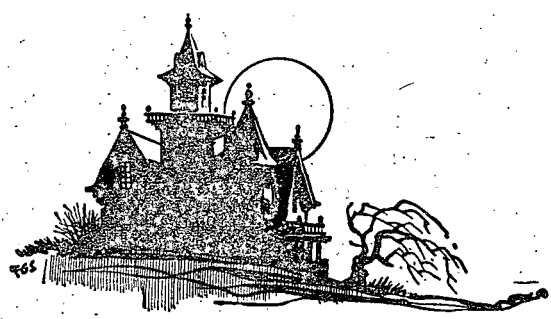
transfigured with an incredulous, inarticulate, grateful joy.

She'd had no idea where to strike. Simply, the sharp kitchen knife had thrust itself in and to a vital spot. She found herself weeping, kneeling over him and weeping as he lay there, harmless now and, in his harmlessness, pitiful. So terrible a price to have exacted from him! She and all those other women—if they could but have been "easy and kind." Easy and kind, understanding, forgiving, "even a little bit loving." But they could not. And so—

And so she was leaving him, lying there on the warm red tiles of her kitchen floor, his broad white face turned up, witless, to the swinging oil lamp. Leaving him there and blundering across to the telephone in the hall. "I didn't mean to kill him! I had to save myself—didn't I? I had to save myself, myself and all those other women to come. And the knife was on the dresser. But I didn't mean to kill him! He was—he was such—"

After all, apart from—all that—he *had* seemed such a nice man.



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THE INCREDIBLE THEFT

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

(continued from page 31)

"If there's been a burglary, why the devil doesn't old Mayfield send for the police?" demanded Reggie Carrington.

He pushed his chair slightly back from the breakfast table.

He was the last one down. His host, Mrs. Macatta, and Sir George had finished their breakfasts some time before. His mother and Mrs. Vanderlyn were breakfasting in bed.

Sir George, repeating his statement on the lines agreed upon between Lord Mayfield and Hercule Poirot, had a feeling that he was not managing it as well as he might have done.

"To send for a foreigner seems very odd to me," said Reggie. "What has been taken, Father?"

"I don't know exactly, my boy."

Reggie got up. He looked rather on edge this morning.

"Nothing—important? No—papers or anything like that?"

"To tell you the truth, Reggie, I can't tell you exactly."

"Very hush-hush, is it? I see."

Reggie ran up the stairs, paused for a moment halfway with a frown on his face, then continued his ascent and tapped on his mother's door. Her voice bade him enter.

Lady Julia was sitting up in bed, scribbling figures on the back of an envelope.

"Good morning, darling." She looked up, then said sharply, "Reggie, is anything the matter?"

"Nothing much, but it seems there was a burglary last night."

"A burglary? What was taken?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's all very hush-hush. There's some odd kind of private-inquiry agent downstairs asking everybody questions."

"How extraordinary!"

"It's rather unpleasant," said Reggie slowly, "staying in a house when that kind of thing happens."

"What did happen exactly?"

"Don't know. It was sometime after we all went to bed. Look out, Mother, you'll push that tray off."

He rescued the breakfast tray and carried it to a table.

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"Was money taken?"

"I tell you I don't know."

Lady Julia said slowly, "I suppose this inquiry man is asking everybody where they were last night? That kind of thing?"

"Probably. Well, I can't tell him much. I went straight up to bed and was asleep in next to no time."

Lady Julia did not answer.

"I say, Mother, I suppose you couldn't let me have a spot of cash. I'm absolutely broke."

"No, I couldn't," his mother replied decisively. "I've got the most frightful overdraft myself. I don't know what your father will say when he hears about it."

There was a tap at the door and Sir George entered.

"Ah, there you are, Reggie. Will you go down to the library? M. Hercule Poirot wants to see you."

Poirot had just concluded an interview with the redoubtable Mrs. Macatta. A few brief questions had elicited the information that Mrs. Macatta had gone up to bed just before eleven, and had heard or seen nothing helpful.

Poirot slid gently from the topic of the burglary to more personal matters. He himself had a great admiration for Lord Mayfield. As a member of the general public he felt that Lord Mayfield was a truly great man. Of course, Mrs. Macatta, being in the know, would have a far better means of estimating that than himself.

"Lord Mayfield has brains," admitted Mrs. Macatta. "And he has carved his career out entirely for himself. He owes nothing to hereditary influence. He has a certain lack of vision, perhaps. In that I find all men sadly alike. They lack the breadth of a woman's imagination. Woman, M. Poirot, is going to be the great force in government in ten years' time."

Poirot said that he was sure of it.

He slid to the topic of Mrs. Vanderlyn. Was it true, as he had heard hinted, that she and Lord Mayfield were very close friends?

"Not in the least. To tell you the truth, I was very surprised to meet her here. Very surprised indeed."

Poirot invited Mrs. Macatta's opinion of Mrs. Vanderlyn—and got it.

"One of those absolutely *useless* women, M. Poirot. Women that make one despair of one's own sex! A parasite, first and last a parasite."

"Men admire her?"

"Men!" Mrs. Macatta spoke the word with contempt. "Men are always taken in by those very obvious good looks. That

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boy, now, young Reggie Carrington, flushing every time she spoke to him, absurdly flattered by being taken notice of by her. And the silly way she flattered him too. Praising his bridge—which actually was far from brilliant."

"He is not a good player?"

"He made all sorts of mistakes last night."

"Lady Julia is a good player, is she not?"

"Much *too* good in my opinion," said Mrs. Macatta. "It's almost a profession with her. She plays morning, noon, and night."

"For high stakes?"

"Yes, indeed, much higher than I would care to play. Indeed I shouldn't consider it *right*."

"She makes a good deal of money at the game?"

Mrs. Macatta gave a loud and virtuous snort.

"She reckons on paying her debts that way. But she's been having a bad run of luck lately, so I've heard. She looked last night as though she had something on her mind. The evils of gambling, M. Poirot, are only slightly less than the evils caused by drink. If I had my way, this country should be purified—"

Poirot was forced to listen to a somewhat lengthy discussion on the purification of England's morals. Then he closed the conversation adroitly and sent for Reggie Carrington.

He summed the young man up carefully as he entered the room—the weak mouth camouflaged by the rather charming smile, the indecisive chin, the eyes set far apart, the rather narrow head. He thought that he knew Reggie Carrington's type fairly well.

"Mr. Reggie Carrington?"

"Yes. Anything I can do?"

"Just tell me what you can about last night?"

"Well, let me see, we played bridge—in the drawing room. After that I went up to bed."

"That was at what time?"

"Just before eleven. I suppose the robbery took place after that?"

"Yes, after that. You did not hear or see anything?"

Reggie shook his head regretfully. "I'm afraid not. I went straight to bed and I sleep pretty soundly."

"You went straight up from the drawing room to your bedroom and remained there until the morning?"

"That's right."

"Curious," said Poirot.

Reggie said sharply, "What do you mean, curious?"

"You did not, for instance, hear a scream?"

"No, I didn't."

"Ah, very curious."

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"Look here, I don't know what you mean."

"You are, perhaps, slightly deaf?"

"Certainly not."

Poirot's lips moved. It was possible that he was repeating the word curious for the third time. Then he said, "Well, thank you, Mr. Carrington, that is all."

Reggie got up and stood rather irresolutely.

"You know," he said, "now that you come to mention it, I believe I did hear something of the kind."

"Ah, you did hear something?"

"Yes, but you see, I was reading a book—a detective story, as a matter of fact—and I—well, I didn't really quite take it in."

"Ah," said Poirot, "a most satisfying explanation."

His face was quite impassive.

Reggie still hesitated, then he turned and walked slowly to the door. There he paused and asked, "I say, what was stolen?"

"Something of great value, Mr. Carrington. That is all I am at liberty to say."

"Oh," said Reggie rather blankly.

He went out.

Poirot nodded his head.

"It fits," he murmured. "It fits very nicely."

He touched a bell and inquired courteously if Mrs. Vanderlyn was up yet.

Mrs. Vanderlyn swept into the room looking very handsome. She was wearing an artfully cut russet sports suit that showed up the warm lights in her hair. She swept to a chair and smiled in a dazzling fashion at the little man in front of her.

For a moment something showed through the smile. It might have been triumph, it might almost have been mockery. It was gone almost immediately, but it had been there. Poirot found the suggestion of it interesting.

"Burglars? Last night? But how dreadful! Why, no, I never heard a *thing*. What about the police? Can't they *do* anything?"

Again, just for a moment, the mockery showed in her eyes.

Hercule Poirot thought: "It is very clear that *you* are not afraid of the police, my lady. You know very well that they are not going to be called in."

And from that followed—what?

He said soberly, "You comprehend, Madame, it is an affair of the most discreet."

"Why, naturally, M.—Poirot, isn't it?—I shouldn't dream of breathing a word. I'm much too

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great an admirer of dear Lord Mayfield to do anything to cause him the least little bit of worry."

She crossed her knees. A highly polished slipper of brown leather dangled on the tip of her silk-shod foot. She smiled, a warm, compelling smile of perfect health and deep satisfaction.

"Do tell me if there's anything at all I can do?"

"I thank you, Madame. You played bridge in the drawing room last night?"

"Yes."

"I understand that then all the ladies went up to bed?"

"That is right."

"But someone came back to fetch a book. That was you, was it not, Mrs. Vanderlyn?"

"I was the first one to come back—yes."

"What do you mean—the *first* one?" said Poirot sharply.

"I came back right away," explained Mrs. Vanderlyn. "Then I went up and rang for my maid. She was a long time coming. I rang again. Then I went out on the landing. I heard her voice and I called her. After she had brushed my hair I sent her away—she was in a nervous, upset state and tangled the brush in my hair once or twice. It was then, just as I sent her away, that I saw Lady Julia coming up the stairs. She told me she had been down for a book too. Curious, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Vanderlyn smiled as she finished, a wide, rather feline smile. Hercule Poirot thought to himself that Mrs. Vanderlyn did not like Lady Julia Carrington.

"As you say, Madame. Tell me, did you hear your maid scream?"

"Why, yes, I did."

"Did you ask her about it?"

"Yes. She told me she thought she had seen a floating figure in white—such nonsense!"

"What was Lady Julia wearing last night?"

"Oh, you think perhaps—yes, I see. She *was* wearing a white evening dress. Of course, that explains it. She must have caught sight of her in the darkness. These girls are so superstitious."

"Your maid has been with you a long time, Madame?"

"Oh, no." Mrs. Vanderlyn opened her eyes rather wide. "Only about five months."

"I should like to see her presently, if you do not mind, Madame."

Mrs. Vanderlyn raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, certainly," she said rather coldly.

"I should like, you understand, to question her."

"Oh, yes."

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Again a flicker of amusement.

Poirot rose and bowed.

"Madame," he said. "You have my complete admiration."

Mrs. Vanderlyn for once seemed a trifle taken aback.

"Oh, M. Poirot, how nice of you, but why?"

"You are, Madame, so perfectly armored, so completely sure of yourself."

Mrs. Vanderlyn laughed a little uncertainly.

"Now I wonder," she said, "if I am to take that as a compliment?"

Poirot said, "It is, perhaps, a warning—not to treat life with arrogance."

Mrs. Vanderlyn laughed with more assurance. She got up and held out a hand.

"Dear M. Poirot, I do wish you all success. Thank you for all the charming things you have said to me."

She went out. Poirot murmured to himself, "You wish me success, do you? Ah, but you are very sure I am not going to meet with success! Yes, you are very sure indeed. That, it annoys me very much."

With a certain petulance, he pulled the bell and asked that Mademoiselle Leonie be sent to him.

His eyes roamed over her appreciatively as she stood hesitating in the doorway, in her black dress with her neatly parted black waves of hair and her modestly dropped eyelids. He nodded slow approval.

"Come in, Mademoiselle Leonie," he said. "Do not be afraid."

She came in and stood demurely before him.

"Do you know," said Poirot with a sudden change of tone, "that I find you very good to look at."

Leonie responded promptly. She flashed him a glance out of the corner of her eyes and murmured softly, "Monsieur is very kind."

"Figure to yourself," said Poirot. "I demand of M. Carlile whether you are or are not good-looking and he replies that he does not know!"

Leonie cocked her chin up contemptuously. "That image!"

"That describes him very well."

"I do not believe he has ever looked at a girl in his life, that one."

"Probably not. A pity. He has missed a lot. But there are others in this house who are more appreciative, is it not so?"

"Really, I do not know what Monsieur means."

"Oh, yes, Mademoiselle Leonie, you know very well. A pretty history that you recount last night about a ghost that you have seen. As soon as I hear

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that you are standing there with your hands to your head, I know very well that there is no question of ghosts. If a girl is frightened she clasps her heart, or she raises her hands to her mouth to stifle a cry; but if her hands are on her hair it means something very different. *It means that her hair has been ruffled and that she is hastily patting it right again!* Now then, Mademoiselle, let us have the truth. Why did you scream on the stairs?"

"But, Monsieur, it is true, I saw a tall figure all in white—"

"Mademoiselle, do not insult my intelligence. That story, it may have been good enough for M. Carlile, but it is not good enough for Hercule Poirot. The truth is that you had just been kissed, is it not so? And I will make a guess that it was M. Reggie Carrington who kissed you."

Leonie twinkled an unabashed eye at him.

"*Eh bien,*" she demanded, "after all, what is a kiss?"

"What, indeed?" said Poirot gallantly.

"You see, the young gentleman he came up behind me and caught me round the waist—and so naturally he startled me and I screamed. If I had known —well, then naturally I would not have screamed."

"Naturally," agreed Poirot.

"But he came upon me like a cat. Then the study door opened and out came *M. le secretaire* and the young gentleman slipped away upstairs and there I was looking like a fool. Naturally I had to say something—especially to"—she broke into French—"*un jeune homme comme ca, tellement comme il faut!*"

"So you invent a ghost?"

"Indeed, Monsieur, it was all I could think of. A tall figure all in white, that floated. It is ridiculous but what else could I do?"

"Nothing. So now, all is explained. I had my suspicions from the first."

Leonie shot him a provocative glance.

"Monsieur is very clever, and very sympathetic."

"And since I am not going to make you any embarrassments over the affair you will do something for me in return?"

"Most willingly, Monsieur."

"How much do you know of your mistress's affairs?"

"Not very much, Monsieur. have my ideas, of course."

"And those ideas?"

"Well, it does not escape me that the friends of Madame are always soldiers, or sailors or airmen. And then there are other friends—foreign gentlemen who come to see her very quietly sometimes. Madame is

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very handsome, though I do not think she will be so much longer. The young men, they find her very attractive. Sometimes, I think, they say too much. But it is only my idea, that. Madame does not confide in me."

"What you would have me to understand is that Madame plays a lone hand?"

"That is right, Monsieur."

"In other words, you cannot help me."

"I fear not, Monsieur. I would if I could."

"Tell me, your mistress is in a good mood today?"

"Decidedly, Monsieur."

"Something has happened to please her?"

"She has been in good spirits ever since she came here."

"Well, Leonie, you should know."

The girl answered confidently, "Yes, Monsieur. I could not be mistaken there. I know all Madame's moods. She is in high spirits."

"Positively triumphant?"

"That is exactly the word, Monsieur."

Poirot nodded gloomily. "I find that—a little hard to bear. Yet I perceive that it is inevitable. Thank you, Mademoiselle, that is all."

Leonie threw him a coquettish glance. "Thank you, Monsieur. If I meet Monsieur on the stairs, be well assured that I shall not scream."

"My child," said Poirot with dignity. "I am of advanced years. What have I to do with such frivolities?"

With a little twitter of laughter, Leonie left.

Poirot paced slowly up and down the room. His face became grave and anxious.

"And now," he said at last, "for Lady Julia. What will she say, I wonder?"

Lady Julia came into the room with a quiet air of assurance. She bent her head graciously, accepted the chair that Poirot drew forward, and spoke in a low well-bred voice.

"Lord Mayfield says that you wish to ask me some questions?"

"Yes, Madame. It is about last night."

"About last night, yes?"

"What happened after you had finished your game of bridge?"

"My husband thought it was too late to begin another rubber. So I went up to bed."

"And then?"

"I went to sleep."

"That is all?"

"Yes. I'm afraid I can't tell you anything of much interest. When did this"—she hesitated—"burglary occur?"

"Very soon after you went upstairs."

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"I see. And what exactly was taken?"

"Some private papers, Madame."

"Important papers?"

"Very important."

She frowned a little and then said, "They were—valuable?"

"Yes, Madame, they were worth a great deal of money."

"I see."

There was a pause, and then Poirot said, "What about your book, Madame?"

"My book?" She raised bewildered eyes to him.

"Yes, I understand Mrs. Vanderlyn to say that sometime after you three ladies had retired you went down again to fetch a book."

"Yes, of course, so I did."

"So that, as a matter of fact, you did *not* go straight to bed when you went upstairs? You returned to the drawing room?"

"Yes, I had forgotten."

"While you were in the drawing room, did you hear someone scream?"

"No—yes—I don't think so."

"Surely, Madame, you could not have failed to hear it in the drawing room."

Lady Julia flung her head back and said firmly, "I heard nothing."

Poirot raised his eyebrows, but did not reply.

The silence grew uncomfortable.

Lady Julia asked abruptly, "What is being done?"

"Being done? I do not understand you, Madame."

"I mean about the robbery. Surely the police must be doing something."

Poirot shook his head.

"The police have not been called in. I am in charge."

She stared at him, her restless face sharpened and tense. Her eyes, dark and searching, sought to pierce his impassivity. They fell at last.

"You cannot tell me what is being done?"

"I can only assure you, Madame, that I am leaving no stone unturned."

"To catch the thief—or to—recover the papers?"

"The recovery of the papers is the main thing, Madame."

Her manner changed. It became bored, listless.

"Yes," she said indifferently. "I suppose it is."

There was another pause.

"Is there anything else, M. Poirot?"

"No, Madame. I will not detain you further."

"Thank you."

He opened the door for her. She went out without glancing at him.

Poirot went back to the fireplace and carefully rearranged the ornaments on the mantelpiece. He was still at it

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when Lord Mayfield came in through the French window.

"Well?" said the latter.

"Very well, I think. Events are shaping themselves as they should."

Lord Mayfield said, staring at him, "You are pleased."

"No, I am not pleased. But I am content."

"Really, M. Poirot, I cannot make you out."

"I am not such a charlatan as you think."

"I never said—"

"No, but you *thought!* No matter. I am not offended. It is sometimes necessary for me to adopt a certain pose."

Lord Mayfield looked at him with a certain amount of distrust. Hercule Poirot was a man he did not understand. He wanted to despise him, but something warned him that this ridiculous little man was not so futile as he appeared. Charles McLaughlin had always been able to recognize capability.

"Well," he said, "we are in your hands. What do you advise next?"

"Can you get rid of your guests?"

"I think it might be arranged. I could explain that I have to go to London over this affair. They will then probably offer to leave."

"Very good. Try and arrange it like that."

Lord Mayfield hesitated. "You don't think—?"

"I am quite sure that that would be the wise course to take."

Lord Mayfield shrugged. "Well, if you say so."

And he went out.

The guests left after lunch. Mrs. Vanderlyn and Mrs. Macatta went by train, the Carringtons had their car. Poirot was standing in the hall as Mrs. Vanderlyn bade her host a charming farewell.

"So terribly sorry you having this bother and anxiety. I do hope it will turn out all right for you. I won't breathe a word of anything."

She pressed his hand and went out to where the Rolls-Royce was waiting to take her to the station. Mrs. Macatta was already inside. Her adieu had been curt and unsympathetic.

Suddenly Leonie, who had been getting in front with the chauffeur, came running back into the hall.

"The dressing case of Madame, it is not in the car," she exclaimed.

There was a hurried search. At last Lord Mayfield discovered it where it had been put down in the shadow of an old oak chest. Leonie uttered a glad little cry as she seized the elegant affair of green morocco,

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and hurried out with it.

Then Mrs. Vanderlyn leaned out of the car.

"Lord Mayfield, Lord Mayfield." She handed him a letter. "Would you mind putting this in your mailbag? If I keep it meaning to mail it in town, I'm sure to forget. Letters just stay in my bag for days."

Sir George Carrington was fidgeting with his watch. He was a maniac for punctuality.

"They're cutting it fine," he murmured. "Very fine. Unless they're careful, they'll miss the train—"

His wife said irritably, "Oh, don't fuss, George. After all, it's their train, not ours!"

He looked at her reproachfully.

The Rolls-Royce drove off.

Reggie drew up at the front door in the Carringtons' Morris.

"All ready, Father," he said.

The servants began bringing out the Carringtons' luggage. Reggie supervised its disposal in the trunk compartment.

Poirot moved out of the front door, watching the proceeding.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his arm. Lady Julia's voice spoke in an agitated whisper.

"M. Poirot. I must speak to you—at once."

He yielded to her insistent hand. She drew him into a small morning room and closed the door. She came close to him.

"Is it true what you said—that the discovery of the papers is what matters most to Lord Mayfield?"

"It is quite true, Madame."

"If—if those papers were returned to you, would you undertake that they should be given back to Lord Mayfield, and no questions asked?"

"I am not sure I understand you."

"You must! I am sure that you do! I am suggesting that the—the thief should remain anonymous if the papers are returned."

"How soon would that be, Madame?"

"Definitely within twelve hours."

"You can promise that?"

"I can promise it."

As he did not answer, she repeated urgently, "Will you guarantee that there will be no publicity?"

He answered then, very gravely, "Yes, Madame, I will guarantee that."

"Then everything can be arranged."

She passed abruptly from the room. A moment later Poirot heard the car drive away.

He crossed the hall and went along the passage to the study. Lord Mayfield was there. He looked up as Poirot entered.

"Well?" he said.

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Poirot spread out his hands.

"The case is ended, Lord Mayfield."

"What?"

Poirot repeated word for word the scene between himself and Lady Julia.

Lord Mayfield looked at him with a stupefied expression.

"But what does it mean? I don't understand."

"It is very clear, is it not? Lady Julia knows who stole the plans."

"You don't mean she took them herself?"

"Certainly not. Lady Julia may be a gambler, but she is not a thief. But if she offers to return the plans, it means that they were taken by her husband or her son. Now, Sir George Carrington was out on the terrace with you. That leaves the son.

"I think I can reconstruct the happenings of last night fairly accurately. Lady Julia went to her son's room last night and found it empty. She came downstairs to look for him, but did not find him. This morning she hears of the theft, and she also hears that her son declares that he went straight to his room *and never left it.* That, she knows, is not true.

"And she knows something else about her son. She knows that he is weak, that he is desperately hard up for money. She has observed his infatuation for Mrs. Vanderlyn. The whole thing is clear to her. Mrs. Vanderlyn has persuaded Reggie to steal the plans. But she determines to play her part also. She will tackle Reggie, get hold of the papers, and return them."

"But the whole thing is quite impossible," cried Lord Mayfield.

"Yes, it is impossible, but Lady Julia does not know that. She does not know what I, Hercule Poirot, know—that young Reggie Carrington was not stealing papers last night, but instead was philandering with Mrs. Vanderlyn's maid."

"The whole thing is a mare's nest!"

"Exactly."

"And the case is not ended at all!"

"Yes, it is ended. *I, Hercule Poirot, know the truth.* You do not believe me? You did not believe me yesterday when I said I knew where the plans were. But I did know. They were very close at hand."

"Where?"

"They were in your pocket, my lord."

There was a pause, then Lord Mayfield said, "Do you really know what you are saying, M. Poirot?"

"Yes, I know. I know that I am speaking to a very clever

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man. From the first it worried me that you, who were admittedly short-sighted, should be so positive about the figure you had seen leaving the French window. You wanted that solution—the convenient solution—to be accepted. Why?

"Later, one by one, I eliminated everyone else. Mrs. Vanderlyn was upstairs, Sir George was with you on the terrace, Reggie Carrington was with the maid on the stairs, Mrs. Macatta was blamelessly in her bedroom. It is next to the housekeeper's room, and Mrs. Macatta snores! Lady Julia, it is true, was in the drawing room; but Lady Julia clearly believed her son guilty.

"So there remained only two possibilities. Either Carlile did not put the papers on the desk but into his own pocket—and that is not reasonable because, as you pointed out, he could have taken a tracing of them—or else the plans were there when you walked over to the desk, and the only place they could have gone was into *your* pocket. In that case everything was clear. Your insistence on the figure you had seen, your insistence on Carlile's innocence, your disinclination to have me summoned.

"One thing did puzzle me—the motive. You were, I was convinced, an honest man, a man of integrity. That showed in your anxiety that no innocent person should be suspected. It was also obvious that the theft of the plans might easily affect your career unfavorably.

"Why, then, this wholly unreasonable theft?

"And at last the answer came to me. The crisis in your career, some years ago, the assurances given to the world by the Prime Minister that you had had no negotiations with the power in question. Suppose that was not strictly true, that there remained some record—a letter, perhaps—showing that in actual fact you *had* done what you had publicly denied. Such a denial was necessary in the interests of public policy. But it is doubtful if the man in the street would see it that way. It might mean that at the moment when supreme power might be given into your hands, some stupid echo from the past would undo everything.

"I suspect that that letter has been preserved in the hands of a certain government, that that government offered to trade with you—the letter in exchange for the plans of the new bomber. Some men would have refused. You did not! You agreed. Mrs. Vanderlyn was the agent in the matter. She came here by arrangement to make

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the exchange. You gave yourself away when you admitted that you had formed no definite stratagem for entrapping her. That admission made your reason for inviting her here incredibly weak.

"You arranged the robbery. You pretended to see the thief on the terrace—thereby clearing Carlile of suspicion. Even if he had not left the room, the desk was so near the window that a thief might have taken the plans while Carlile was busy at the safe with his back turned. You walked over to the desk, took the plans, and kept them on your own person until the moment when, by prearranged plan, you slipped them into Mrs. Vanderlyn's dressing case. In return she handed you the fatal letter disguised as an unposted letter of her own."

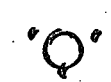
Poirot stopped.

Lord Mayfield said, "Your knowledge is very complete, M. Poirot. You must think me an unutterable traitor."

Poirot made a quick gesture. "No, no, Lord Mayfield. I think, as I said, that you are a very clever man. It came to me suddenly as we talked here last night. You are a first-class engineer. There will be, I think, some alterations in the specifications of that bomber, alterations done so skillfully that it will be difficult to grasp why the machine is not the success it ought to be. A certain foreign power will find it a failure, a disappointment."

Again there was a silence—then Lord Mayfield said, "You are much too clever, M. Poirot. I will only ask you to believe one thing: I have faith in myself. I believe that I am the man needed to guide England through the days of crisis that I see coming. If I did not honestly believe that I am needed by my country, I would not have done what I have done—made the best of both worlds—saved myself from disaster by a trick."

"My lord," said Poirot, "if you could not make the best of both worlds, you could not be a politician!"



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 364th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a story of great tension—vivid, compelling, frightening . . .

The author, John Coyne, was 32 when he submitted "A Game in the Sun." With degrees from Saint Louis University and from Western Michigan University, he can already claim an interesting and varied career: caddie, golf professional, high school teacher, radio writer, foreign service officer, government employee, college administrator. But his chief ambition has always been to become a serious, fulltime writer. Ever since he was twelve he has written short stories, articles, and novels, all "rejected by nearly every major and minor publishing house in America." Currently, he tells us, his desk holds six unpublished novels and 50 short stories. His first published fiction, in this issue, derives from the five years he spent in Africa, teaching and working for the Peace Corps.

Mark our words: some of those 50 short stories and six novels will, one of these days, see the light of print . . .

A GAME IN THE SUN

by JOHN COYNE

Betsy was not allowed to play croquet with her husband and the Reverend, so she sat in the shade of the trees at the top of the mound. The mound overlooked a lush rainforest which grew thick and dense to the edges of the Mission Compound. The view was compelling and frightening to Betsy. The close steamy jungle made her feel insignificant and as she half listened to Mrs. Shaw's chatter, she watched the bush as if it were alive.

The Reverend and Mrs. Shaw had started the Mission 20 years before. Landscaping woods near a village of mud and cattle-dung huts, they cut into the underbrush, leaving only the ancient acacias and gum trees

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for shade, and planting lawns and gardens. The African laborers had instructions to keep the lawns neatly trimmed during the rainy season, well watered the remainder of the year.

The Shaws had been the only white people in the district until Betsy and her husband arrived with the Peace Corps to teach in the government school. It was their second year in-country and as Betsy had calculated that morning, she had only 18 more Sundays left in Africa.

"You really won't know Africa for ten years. It takes that long to get a feel of the land," the Reverend had said when he first dropped by to say hello and welcome them to the village. He had crowded himself into their doll-like house, held onto his father's straw hat, and looked with alarm about the inadequate place. "The Peace Corps's not giving you much cooperation, are they?" He shook his head, frowning over the lack of facilities.

He was a big fleshy man, dressed in worn jeans, a tight-fitting plaid shirt, and heavy-duty boots. His face was burst from the long self-appointed days in the African sun. Only his forehead, protected by the straw hat, was chalky. His eyes were tiny and squinted against the sun. Dark lines clustered at their corners. The rest of his face was soft and slightly moist. He kept a white handkerchief folded in the palm of his hand and continually wiped the running sweat off his red cheeks, as if he were polishing them.

"Look, kids, I want ya to come to our place anytime. Anytime. Come tomorrow for lunch, a game of croquet." He glanced again about the house. "You're going to need all the comforts of home you can get. But with the help of God... with the help of God."

Before the game the Shaws' houseboys, barefooted and in starched white uniforms, moved like tropical birds among them, serving iced tea. The two men talked about the week, the news from the school and Mission, while Mrs. Shaw took Betsy through the gardens, the beds of exotic flowers which grew in the heat and humidity, brilliant and thick.

Mrs. Shaw wore farm gloves and with a gardener's eye clipped flowers and presented them to Betsy. Mrs. Shaw was also concerned about Betsy and her husband living in the village, in a mud-and-dung house, in among the Africans. The flowers were to pretty up Betsy's life.

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Mrs. Shaw lay her scissors on the lawn table and pulled off her gloves, then she rubbed baby lotion thoroughly into her hands. The scent was stronger than the flowers and reminded Betsy of her home, of growing up as a little girl.

"I learned years ago that baby lotion was the answer. Just ordinary baby lotion keeps me just fine. The weather is so cruel on people, women especially." Unlike her husband, Mrs. Shaw looked as if she had never been in the African sun. Her skin was milky under the protection of a wide-brimmed bonnet and deep in the shadows her eyes flashed like those of a cornered animal. "After a while you learn these little hints. It takes time, of course, but with the help of God." Her voice bore inward like a drill.

Betsy was no longer listening. She had closed her eyes and was leaning back in the lawn chair, resting. She knew she must not begin to cry in front of these people. She must not be vulnerable. There were, after all, only 18 Sundays left in Africa. She had gone that morning into the bedroom, to her homemade calendar behind the door, and crossed off another day. Briefly she had felt lighthearted, gay, but that exhilaration had slipped away in the hot bedroom, in the heat of the day. Betsy sighed and then, unexpectedly, shivered.

"Are you all right, dear?" Mrs. Shaw reached over. Betsy could feel the damp fingers, the baby lotion sticky on her own arm.

"No—nothing. I'm fine." She gathered herself together, managed a thin smile, blinked away a rush of tears, said quickly, shading her eyes and looking over the lawns, "Are they finished?"

"You've been remembering your quinine, haven't you, dear?" Mrs. Shaw wouldn't let go.

"Oh, of course, it's nothing really, Mrs. Shaw. We'll be into the rainy season soon. Perhaps I'm feeling the first chills. You know how cold it suddenly seems?" She talked rapidly.

"Yes, perhaps even in the hot sun one can feel chilled." And Mrs. Shaw let the subject slip away, as if it were an error.

On the lawns before them the game was drawing to a close. The Reverend was ahead as always, banging his mallet against the wooden ball, moving quickly from one wicket to the next, looking awkward, too huge for the grass game.

"I've gotcha, Jesse. I've gotcha again." His voice was buoyant.

Jesse behind him, struggling, hit the ball. It bounced

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erratically across the grass, hapless. He followed, thin and undernourished. Jesse had lost weight in Africa and now his trousers were baggy. He laughed at his miscalculations, amused by his inability. She watched him with eyes bled of color, gray and watery, studied him with detachment, as if watching a stranger. Who was this person, she wondered.

The game was over. They came to her through the heat, haze, and sun, their bodies shimmery. Perhaps she was sick. Tentatively she touched herself, felt the clammy skin of her forearm. Her fingers were cold and around her the lawns and gardens were airless.

"Had enough for one day, boys?" Mrs. Shaw grinned. "I'll have lunch ready in minutes." She clapped once, like a single piano note, and the dark houseboys stepped from the shadows and carried food to them on the lawn.

"How's the little lady?" the Reverend asked and spread himself into the lounge chair beside Betsy. "You're lookin' peaked, honey."

"I was just saying so myself, Walter. She doesn't look at all well. Don't you agree, Jesse?"

They wouldn't let her alone. All of them gauged her with worried looks. Her husband stared. His mouth had flopped open, as if half his mind had been blown away. He touched her and she jerked away.

"Betsy, why don't you lie down a while, until the day cools?" Mrs. Shaw was at her side.

Betsy would have to get away from these people. Part of her mind told her she did not know them. And these lawns, the enclosing rainforest, had not happened to her. She would go somewhere cool, somewhere out of the heat. She could hardly breathe. Why won't it rain? The smell of baby lotion again and the touch of warm flesh.

She let herself be guided from the hot gardens into the house where curtains were drawn and there was a bit of air. The bedcovers were soft silk, not the coarse linen from the village. They let her sleep . . .

The rains began the next day. Standing at the windows of the Third Form, Betsy watched it soak into the dry football field. She reached out the window and the cool water soaked her arm. It felt refreshing and she smiled for the first time in weeks.

That afternoon Betsy was going to tell Jesse she wanted a divorce, but he had come home after school—wet and muddy into the tiny house—said

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something silly about her hair, something she knew was meant to cheer her up; and she had gone into the bedroom, slammed the door, and cried herself to sleep.

It was raining again when she woke. The rain pounded on the tin roof, deafeningly. She jerked the sheets around her without getting up, and slept. When she woke a second time it was dark; he had lit the lamp and made her soup.

"You'll feel better after this." Jesse held out the cup like an offering. His face carried a blankness, like a birthmark. He did not comprehend subtleties, or his wife. She took the soup without speaking, without looking at him, and sipped it. The cup in her fingers was as warm as a small bird and she kept both hands tight around the porcelain, afraid to let it go.

Jesse kept talking, incessantly, afraid of the silence. He had met the Reverend in the village and the Shaws asked about her, wanted to know if Betsy would like to move into the Mission for a few days, until she felt better.

"I feel better."

"Yeah, sure. I told the Reverend you were okay. Told him it was just the heat, you know, Sunday." Jesse perched tentatively, as if he didn't belong, on the edge of her bed.

They had requested a double bed from the Peace Corps early in their tour, but it had never come, and now she was glad of the privacy. If she could only be alone. That was the problem: she couldn't get away.

"I want to sleep." She handed back the cup, careful so their fingers did not touch.

"Again?" He sounded lonely.

She did not respond, but pulled the sheets around her and turned away, dismissing him with silence. This time, however, she did not sleep, only watched the dark room, the dung walls, whitewashed with lime. Jesse left with the shaky yellow lamplight. Betsy could hear him in the other room trying to be quiet, moving carefully, not making noise. She sobbed into the sheets.

Betsy did not go to school the rest of the week. Every morning after he left for school she would wrap herself in a robe and, wearing boots, slip and slide through the mud to the outhouse and throw up whatever little she had eaten into the deep smelly pit. And then, trembling, she'd sit there among the cobwebs and the stink of the tin outhouse until her strength came back and she could make it again through the slush.

Betsy woke from another

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faulty daytime sleep and found the Reverend and Mrs. Shaw at the foot of her bed, filling the room like massive furniture. They stood tensely, afraid to touch the surroundings. Mrs. Shaw had a giant bouquet of flowers, flaming like a torch in the dark room. The room was as disheveled as a drunk—drawers left open, clothes scattered. It also had a close stale smell. The smell of unwashed bodies.

"My dear, my dear!" Mrs. Shaw rushed through the mess to Betsy, felt her temperature, began fussing with the linen.

"I'm fine; I'm fine. It's just the weather, that's all. I'm feeling better every day." Betsy slipped a smile on and off her face.

The Reverend, with one hand mopping sweat from his red cheeks, said from the end of the bed, as if calling from a great distance, "We want to see you Sunday. Gotta get you in a game."

Betsy did not respond. She let Mrs. Shaw wipe the perspiration from her face and neck.

"Walter, you go ahead. I'll stay a while with Betsy." She smiled at her patient, then began with busy efficient hands to tidy the covers and make Betsy presentable.

When Betsy woke again, Mrs. Shaw was gone, the room straightened, and her husband home from classes, moving about in the other room. He seemed to bang into everything. Why was he so inept? How did she not know that about him, she wondered. He appeared in the narrow doorway, cautious as a child.

"Bring me the calendar," she ordered, though her weak voice lacked authority. Jesse was happy to help; he hurried to find her magic marker and homemade posterboard.

She took the calendar without thanking him, though he waited for the words, hoped to hear a bit of kindness. She couldn't say thanks, couldn't give him a civil remark. Why didn't he take control, be demanding, take care of her? She slashed black lines through the dates while he stood beside her bed like one of Mrs. Shaw's houseboys.

"I want you to beat the Reverend at croquet," she said, finishing with the calendar.

"Beat the Reverend?" Jesse frowned, moved to look at her face. "But I can't beat him!" His voice touched the edge of alarm.

"You never try. That's your problem." She tossed the calendar aside and continued not to look at him, but to gaze across the room, eyes locked

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onto a small patch of wall where a chunk of dung had swollen and the whitewash had peeled away, like a scab. "If you had tried we wouldn't need to be in Peace Corps. You could have gotten out of Vietnam another way."

"It's not a question of trying!" Jesse stuck his small hands into the pockets of his baggy trousers and began to pace. "And you wanted to go too, remember."

"I'm sick of going out there, week after week, talking to that old woman, watching you get beaten—"

"It's a game, Betsy, for God's sake!" He moved about at the end of the bed to catch her eye, but she kept turning away. "You know he likes to win. Croquet is his big deal—the way he takes care of those lawns, sets the wickets."

"You could beat him just once, that's all. No! You're such a damn weak sister." The sentence spilled out, uncontrolled. She watched him hunch up against the words. "Him and his dumb wife, God! How have I stood all of you?" Tears stopped her and she clamped both hands across her mouth to keep from screaming.

Jesse's arms went tentatively around her. He smelled of sweat and the local soap. She did not like his odors. He only washed casually, one bath a week. It was too much trouble hauling and heating water, taking a sponge bath in the kitchen, using the metal tub. There lingered about him a close stale odor, reminiscent, she suddenly realized, of the young sweaty boys in her classes.

"Get away." She pushed him. "Why don't you wash?"

He left, slamming the door. Later, before falling to sleep for the hundredth time that day, she heard him heating and pouring water into the washtub.

Betsy stared across the lawns toward the rainforest, watched the close, creepy jungle while Mrs. Shaw wrapped a shawl about shoulders, made her comfortable in a lawn chair. Mrs. Shaw's voice rang in her ears. She was full of chatty news from the village, stories of conversions to Christ. Betsy turned her head slowly in the direction of the voice, and Mrs. Shaw's face shimmered.

Betsy felt cold and clammy and the wool shawl was a damp cloth on her shoulders. There was again the oily smell of baby lotion, mixed with the scent of carnations and roses. A gift of flowers, wet with rain, lay abandoned on the table. There were 17 Sundays left in Africa and Betsy knew now she could not make it.

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Bright-colored balls shot over the lawns, trailing sprays of water, and the two men followed from wicket to wicket, halting, swinging fiercely, then hurrying to catch up. The Reverend was ahead, banging the painted balls, shouting, poking fun at Jesse fumbling behind.

Mrs. Shaw leaned over the flowers and whispered, "Dear, are you with child?"

Betsy could feel the breakfast of eggs and toast, of weak tea and lemon, catch like gas in her throat. Mrs. Shaw pressed forward, like a parent. "You're showing all the signs. I told the Reverend. I said, Betsy is with child. I know. I've an uncanny knack for such things." Her eyes flashed.

Tentatively Betsy touched her abdomen, sensed it growing there like fungus inside of her. The Peace Corps had not sent the pills. Days and weeks had passed. She'd kept away from him, begged to be let alone while he panted like a stray dog. It was she who woke one humid night in the single bed, stripped herself naked in the heat, and padding through the house to the refrigerator, drank a cold glass of water that cooled her like rain. She touched the tip of her breast with her wet fingers and shivered. Then she went to Jesse's bed, pulled away the sheet, and woke him with her hands and mouth seeking.

"I've gotcha, Jesse!" The Reverend smashed the ball against the final pole, then turned to her husband still among the pattern of hoops. The Reverend wiped his cheeks with the handkerchief and, laughing, took off the straw hat. He waved to her. "I've got'm, Betsy. I've got'm again. In ten years maybe, in ten years—"

She came running wildly down the soft slope, her face flaming with rage. They dropped the mallets, glanced at each other as if there was some mistake, raised their hands to justify, but she had reached them with the scissors.

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DISCOVERY

another "unknown" story by

O. HENRY

As you may recall from an editorial preface in our May 1971 issue, O. Henry purchased Brann's "Iconoclast" in 1894, while he was living in Austin, Texas. Under the new title of "The Rolling Stone," the weekly proved to be short-lived, but it lasted long enough to publish some of O. Henry's early sketches, stories, and poems. In our May 1971 issue we brought you an "unknown" tale of Tictocq, the great French detective; now we give you another "unknown" story, this one from the October 20, 1894 issue of "The Rolling Stone." And so far as we have been able to determine, "The Confession of ——" has not appeared in print since—this is its first publication in more than 75 years!

So, enjoy another "new," another hitherto "unknown" O. Henry story—one which foreshadows the Old Master's most famous "trademark"...

THE CONFESSION OF ——

by O. HENRY

"But surely, Lynette," said Mama, "your six years' residence in Scotland and England, and your association with the best and most aristocratic people abroad should enable you to judge whether he is a genuine nobleman or not."

"It is very hard nowadays, Mama," I said, "to distinguish the imitation from the genuine. Besides, after you do succeed in identifying the real hall-marked, blown-in-the-bottle article, it's a toss up whether you have anything better than the bogus goods after all."

"What queer language you use, my dear," said Mama.

"Oh, it's the school slang, mother dear. I must really try to break myself of the habit. You are so good to have such

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patience with me."

What caused this conversation between dear Mama and me was my expressing one day a vague doubt concerning Lord Cranston. I had been for six years at an aristocratic young ladies' school near London, and had returned home about a month before. Mama is something of an Anglomaniac, and being herself closely connected with an English family of high standing, was determined to educate me abroad. We were very wealthy, and moved in the best New York society; consequently we had little doubt of realizing Mama's dearest hope that I should marry a titled Englishman.

I had been away so long that Mama hardly knew me when I came home. She looked at me a long time, and then kissed me affectionately, and said: "My dear, you have changed very much from the little girl who left me six years ago, but I am much pleased with you. You have acquired that aristocratic calm and poise that only comes from association with the best people."

Lord Cranston appeared upon the scene about two weeks after I arrived.

He was tall and slender, with an aquiline nose, clear blue eyes, and a long, drooping mustache. His accent and intonation were perfect, and his fingernails of the true filbert shape. His appointments were correct in every particular, and his manners, though polished and flawless, were unobtrusive and quiet. As I remarked to Mama, I was afraid that he was too good to be true.

I had a gay and pleasurable time for a while. Just released from the restrictions of school, I eagerly welcomed the follies and idle pleasures of Narragansett Bay, where we were spending the season. Life in America was also new to me, and the liberty I enjoyed so unusual that a head less cool than mine might have been turned by the draughts I was drinking from the cup of life.

I was beautiful and vivacious. I had improved my mind, and I never lost my presence of mind or my tact.

Lord Cranston was my constant companion. I was a woman, and could see that he loved me. I could have married him any day that I wished.

I scarcely knew what it was that kept me from so doing. He had almost convinced me of the genuineness of his title and his wealth.

But still, some undefinable doubt, some intuitive skepticism, held me back.

I grew vexed because I could find no fault with him. I even

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tried strategy.

One day we were lazily lolling in the shadow of a great rock by the seashore.

"Oh, Lord Cranston," I said suddenly. "I meant to ask you. You say your castle is at Seaview. Surely you must know my dear friend Lady Augusta Trevor, of The Rookery. Her place can be only a mile from Seaview."

Lord Cranston turned his clear blue eyes upon me for a moment, and then said: "There is no family or place of that name in the county. You must have been misinformed as to her residence, Miss Lynette."

Would not an impostor have claimed that he knew her?

That night I came very near promising my hand to Lord Cranston on the south balcony among the oleander bushes.

One afternoon Mama, Lord Cranston, and I were out driving in our carriage, and we stopped at the station as the train arrived, to see the newcomers.

Among the last of the passengers to pass along the platform were a short, stocky young man wearing a rough pepper-and-salt suit and a tweed cap, and a handsome blonde young lady in a traveling dress and a steamer cap.

They looked around in a hesitating way, as if they were undecided where to go.

Suddenly Mama grasped my arm tightly, and I felt her hand tremble.

I glanced at her face, and saw it getting red and pale by turns.

The young lady had stopped and was also gazing at Mama curiously.

The short, stocky young man had also observed us, and fixing a monocle on his left eye, came toward the carriage.

Mama never noticed him, but said "Lynette!" in a queer, trembling voice, and sprang from the carriage.

The strange young lady met her with a bound, and in a second they were in each other's arms, kissing and sobbing.

The short, stocky young man fixed his monocle sternly on Lord Cranston and spoke strange words.

"Higgins, you scoundrel!" he said. "Where are my trunks and papers? I will give you fifteen minutes to produce them, or I will hand you over to the police."

Lord Cranston got gracefully out of the carriage.

"You will find them intact at the Ocean House," he said calmly. "I had a little money of my own, and have had no occasion to draw upon them yet."

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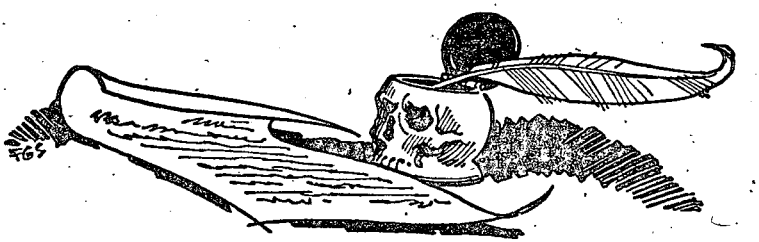
He turned to me and said in a low voice: "Farewell, Miss Lynette. I wish it had all been true."

As he turned to go, I said: "Wait a moment, Mr. Higgins. I think I am going your way."

As we passed down the platform together I heard the young lady say: "And Mama dear, let me introduce Lord Cranston, who has been so kind and attentive to me on the way over. And his valet had stolen all of his things and ran away with them. Now let's go and get some lunch, I am so hungry, and talk about everything."

Who I am does not make any great difference just now.



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a *NEW* L-and-L story by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Another caper by two of our favorite con men, the L-and-L boys who specialize in art forgeries. Lang and Lovell are the perfect team—Lang the "outside" man and Lovell the "inside" man, and this time there's a "between" man, a third L, the French artist Lamartine . . .

NEVER TRUST A PARTNER

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

The girl at the typist's desk looked at me dubiously. "I don't know," she said. "Mr. Kelmartin doesn't like to be disturbed unless it's somebody with an appointment." She was a stocky girl in her late teens or early twenties with a pleasantly unintelligent face.

I smiled and scribbled on the back of a business card: *There are 10,000 reasons why you should see me.*

"Give Mr. Kelmartin this," I said, "and see what he says then."

The girl looked even more dubious than before, but she took the card and went through the door marked "Private" behind her. A couple of moments later she was back.

"He'll see you," she said. She sounded surprised and vaguely let down.

I winked at her and went past her through the door, letting her close it after me.

For one of the city's more successful art dealers Kelmartin certainly was Spartan in his tastes. Although paintings lined the walls of his showroom outside, his own office was bare of decoration and scarcely large enough to accommodate the old-fashioned rolltop desk set square against one wall and two armless wooden chairs. In some ways, though, it was the kind of office you'd expect to find a man like Kelmartin in. He was tall and spare, with the thin sharp-featured face of an old-time Yankee trader and frosty eyes behind small,

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octagonal, rimless glasses.

He removed the glasses as I came in and began to polish them carefully with a handkerchief he drew from his breast pocket. "Just what is it I can do for you, Mr. Lang?" he said. "Or better still"—he glanced down at my card on his desk—"what did you have in mind to do for me?" His voice was so precise as to be almost biting.

I smiled affably. "I understand you're cataloguing the art collection of the late Bernice Magruder," I said.

Kelmartin resettled his glasses on his nose, folded the handkerchief, and stuffed it back in his pocket. "That's hardly a secret," he said. "It was in all the papers."

"Yes," I said. "It was also in the papers that Miss Magruder was as eccentric as they come and bought pretty much as the fancy moved her. And kept what she bought stored away in her back rooms."

Kelmartin eyed me speculatively. "So?" he said.

"So," I said, "until you finish cataloguing the collection no one really has any idea as to what is or isn't in it. And it seems to me that under those circumstances the way is clear for a couple of clever men to make a nice little profit for themselves."

Kelmartin didn't say anything, just continued to study me.

"Suppose," I went on, "a really valuable painting were to be found hidden in the collection. The honest thing to do, of course, would be to list it in the assets of the estate. Which would make the heirs happy, but since they're second or third cousins and already stand to inherit more money than they can spend during the rest of their lives, their lot would hardly be improved. On the other hand, the painting could be quietly sold to a third party and the money diverted to far more deserving individuals."

"Such as you and me," Kelmartin said drily.

"Precisely," I said.

Kelmartin nodded curtly and turned back to the papers on his desk. "Unfortunately, Mr. Lang," he said, "for your little scheme to work it would be necessary that the Magruder collection contain at least one valuable painting. Let me assure you it does not. Bernice Magruder's tastes were as execrable as they were eccentric. I ought to know. I sold her most of the junk she had. And even if there were a pearl in all that dross I certainly wouldn't need you to help me dispose of it. So, good day, Mr. Lang." He

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picked up a pencil and began to make notes on the margin of one of his papers.

I didn't move. "No," I said, "you wouldn't need me. But because there isn't anything valuable in the collection you *do* need me. I can supply the painting."

Kelmartin paused in his writing and looked up at me over the edges of his glasses.

"I work partners with a man named Lovell," I said. "Now, Lovell has his little peculiarities, as who doesn't? He's as jumpy as a bean on a string and a real kook about the food he eats. But more importantly he's an artist with a very real if somewhat specialized talent. He can forge a painting by any artist living or dead and do it so well that only a spectroscopic or electro-luminescent examination can distinguish his copy from the artist's genuine work.

"Most recently he's been concentrating on the French artist Lamartine, because at one point in his development Lamartine did a whole series of paintings of wheatfields. According to Lovell, Lamartine was experimenting with light and shadow effects and didn't consider the paintings to be of any value. So he gave them to his friends and creditors pretty indiscriminately."

"Yes," Kelmartin said thoughtfully, "he did. Some of them have turned up in the oddest places over the years, and I doubt if Lamartine himself knew how many he'd given away or who had them."

"So," I said, "would it be so unbelievable for one to turn up in the Magruder collection?"

"No," Kelmartin said, steepling his fingers before his face and rubbing his thin lips along them. "And with the way Lamartine's reputation has been growing since his death, it would be a valuable painting indeed." He paused and glanced up at me obliquely. "Still it would have to be a very good forgery, and all I have is your word for how good your partner is."

"Judge for yourself," I said. "I've got the painting out in my car right now. I would have brought it in with me except that I didn't think it would be wise to let your girl see me carrying it."

Kelmartin looked at me for a long moment. "You're very sure of yourself, aren't you, Mr. Lang?" he said at last.

"If I am," I said, "it's because I do my homework and know my man before I approach him."

Kelmartin nodded soberly. "Very wise of you," he said, "I'm sure." He got up and opened the door to the outer

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office. "Miss Jones," he said, "I ordered some supplies from Bartlett's this morning. They're supposed to deliver them, but I find I can't wait. Would you mind running over and picking them up?" It was phrased as a request but his voice made it clear that she had better not mind, and the stocky girl got up with something near to alacrity.

As soon as the outer door had closed after her, Kelmartin turned back to me. "All right," he said. "Now let's see that painting of yours."

He spent a good half hour examining the painting in both artificial and natural light. Finally he set it and his magnifying glass down. "There are a couple of flaws, I think," he said, removing his octagonal glasses and rubbing his hand across his eyes. "But that may only be because I know it's a forgery. It's hard to say how I'd react if I came across it cold." He sighed and put his glasses back on. "All in all, though, I'd say your partner is almost as good as you claim he is."

"Then it's a deal?" I said.

"That would depend on the deal," Kelmartin said drily.

"Well," I said, "a Lamartine ordinarily goes for $50,000 to $60,000. Under the circumstances, though, a buyer would expect a real bargain. So I'd say we ask $20,000 and go partners, splitting it down the middle—$10,000 apiece."

Kelmartin hesitated. "It's tempting," he said. "Still, we'd have to approach a prospective buyer and that could be risky."

"No problem," I said. "I already have a prospective buyer in mind."

Kelmartin raised his eyes. "Who?" he said.

"You wouldn't know him," I said. "He's more a speculator than an art collector, interested primarily in picking up something he thinks he can turn around and make a quick profit on."

"I see," Kelmartin said. He chewed thoughtfully on his lip for a moment, then nodded. "All right," he said. "Bring your buyer around here tonight after everyone else has gone." He permitted himself a bleak, wintry smile. "Partner."

I smiled too and left.

It was a little after 7:00 and just beginning to turn dark when I rang Kelmartin's bell. With me this time was a tall heavyset man named Hasso. He stood slightly behind me and looked on impassively, his hands stuck deep in his topcoat pockets against the slight evening chill. With his balding forehead, bulbous nose, and drooping lower lip he resembled nothing so much as a grownup

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version of the grumpy dwarf in *Snow White.*

When there was no motion from within I rang the bell again, more insistently. This time Kelmartin came to the door, peeked out around the drawn shade, and when he saw who it was opened up to let us in.

"Mr. Kelmartin," I said, making the necessary introduction, "this is Mr. Hasso. I'd like him to see the painting we discussed this afternoon."

Kelmartin's eyes flicked suspiciously from me to Hasso.

"It's all right," I said reassuringly. "Mr. Hasso understands the need for discretion."

Kelmartin continued to study Hasso for a moment, then still without uttering a word turned and led us back to his office. Leaving us there, he disappeared into his showroom only to return a few minutes later with the Lamartine. He'd added to the authenticity of our story by fitting it into an ornate and timeworn oak frame.

Hasso took the painting in both hands and studied it silently, his thick lips pursed and a reflective frown creasing his forehead. "What's so great about this?" he said finally. "It's just a picture of a cornfield."

"Wheatfield," Kelmartin corrected. "And as for what's so great about it, nothing really. It's the reputation of the artist that makes it so valuable."

"How valuable?" Hasso demanded.

"In today's market?" Kelmartin said, shrugging. "I'd say upward of $50,000."

"Then how come you're willing to sell it for $20,000?" Hasso said harshly. His eyes caught and held the art dealer's. Kelmartin clearly hadn't expected this bluntness and he opened his mouth somewhat like a startled fish.

"As I told you, Mr. Hasso—" I began.

Hasso shot a quick glance at me and jerked his head in Kelmartin's direction. "I want to hear it from him," he said.

By now Kelmartin had recovered his composure. "Let's just say," he intoned smoothly, "that there are certain irregularities about the transaction that make it inadvisable for me to give a bill of sale or offer my usual guarantee. So I've adjusted my price accordingly."

"Sure," Hasso said, "let's say that." He looked back at the painting. "How do I know this thing is genuine, though?"

"I know something about these things, Mr. Hasso," I put in. "I can vouch for its authenticity. And I'm the one

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taking the risk. All I want you to do is lend me the money to buy it."

"Um-hmm," Hasso said. He looked straight at Kelmartin. "What if I asked to have an expert of my own examine this?"

Kelmartin thought that over for a few moments. "It would be risky," he said. "But I suppose it would be all right—as long as he didn't know where the painting came from and agreed to examine it on the premises here." That last part was a touch of genius. It insured that Hasso's expert wouldn't be able to make an examination scientific enough to expose the forgery.

Hasso nodded his satisfaction. "That's good enough for me," he said. "If you're willing to risk an independent check, there's no reason to insist on one."

"Then you'll lend me the money?" I said eagerly.

Hasso shook his head. "No," he said. "I'll buy it myself."

"Now wait a minute," I began.

Hasso ignored me and turned to Kelmartin. "You wouldn't have any objection to selling to somebody other than Lang?"

"Of course not," Kelmartin said. "Money's money, no matter where it comes from."

"Exactly what I say myself," Hasso said. "I assume you don't want a check."

"Under the circumstances," Kelmartin said, "I think it would be best to keep this a cash transaction."

Hasso pursed his lips and nodded. "It'll take me a day or two to get the cash together," he said. "You'll hold the painting for me?"

Kelmartin opened his mouth to agree, but I cut him off. "Don't make any promises," I said. "At least give me a chance to raise the money somewhere else."

Kelmartin hesitated, then nodded. "All right," he said. "I'll sell to whoever shows up first with the money."

"Fair enough," Hasso said. He set the painting down and grinned at me. "I'm not worried, Lang," he said. "If you could have gotten the money from someone else, you'd never have come to me." He turned back to Kelmartin. "Be seeing you," he said, and left.

As soon as I heard the front door close after him I grinned at Kelmartin. "That went very well, I'd say."

"Perhaps," Kelmartin said. "But I expected your man would have the money with him."

I shrugged. "Hasso's not as rich as he likes to pretend. He'll have to arrange a loan to come

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up with the money. But his reputation's good with the money boys and he'll get it. And since he thinks he's got competition he won't dawdle or try to beat the price down."

"I hope you're right," Kelmartin said.

"I am," I said. I picked up the painting from where Hasso had put it down and looked for something to wrap it in.

Kelmartin frowned. "What are you doing?" he said.

"Taking this with me," I said. I found a copy of the afternoon paper in Kelmartin's wastebasket, smoothed it out on his desk, and began folding it around the painting. "I have one standing rule," I said. "Never trust a partner. And as long as I hold onto this I'm sure you won't make a private deal and cut me out."

"How very prudent of you," Kelmartin said drily. "Perhaps I should insist on similar insurance from you."

"You already have it," I said. "Hasso thinks I'm a rival for the painting. He'd be suspicious as hell if I suddenly showed up trying to sell it."

"Perhaps," Kelmartin said. "But I prefer more concrete insurance." He opened a drawer to his desk and flicked a switch. There was a hum and then a tape recorder began to play back our conversation of that afternoon. Kelmartin let it play about halfway through, then switched it off.

"If you do try to cheat me," he said, "I'll see that this tape gets to your friend Hasso." He smiled his humorless smile. "Somehow I don't think he's the kind of man who would take lightly to having been swindled. And I'm willing to gamble that he'd vent his ire on you, not me."

I inclined my head in acknowledgment of his thrust. "Well, partner," I said, "we seem to be well matched."

"It *would* appear that way, wouldn't it?" Kelmartin said quietly. "And now, good night, Mr. Lang. I'll call you at your hotel when Hasso has the money ready."

I spent the next day loafing around the hotel, reading and catching up on my sleep, while Lovell kept running in and out, easing his nervousness by indulging in yogurt sundaes. Then on the second day Kelmartin called.

"Bring the painting," he said. "It's settlement day."

Lovell looked at me anxiously as I set down the phone. I winked at him. "Right on schedule," I said.

I found Kelmartin alone in his office, the stocky girl having probably been sent on some

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other fool's errand. He snatched the painting away from me, unwrapped it, and set it up against the back of his desk with solicitous care.

"When's Hasso coming?" I said.

"This afternoon," Kelmartin said, tearing his eyes away from the painting. "But the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that it wouldn't be wise for you to be here when he comes."

I started to protest.

"Don't worry," Kelmartin cut in, half irritably. "I have your money for you." He took an envelope from his desk and handed it to me. "You can count it if you like," he said.

I took him at his word and counted it. It came to $10,000 right on the nose. I slipped the envelope into my jacket pocket.

"If you don't mind," I said, "I'd like that tape too."

"Of course," Kelmartin said. He played enough of the tape to prove to me it was the right one, then handed it over.

"Well," I said, "it's been a pleasure doing business with you. If the occasion ever comes up again—"

"Of course, of course," Kelmartin said and ushered me out so hurriedly that if I had been a more sensitive soul I might have suspected that he was trying to get rid of me.

Hasso was waiting where my car was parked two blocks away. "You have something for me, I trust," he said.

I reached in my pocket for an envelope—not the one Kelmartin had given me but another one—and handed it to him. "As agreed," I said, "$1000."

Hasso stuck the envelope in his own pocket.

"Better count it," I said.

"Naw," Hasso said. "I know you wouldn't cheat me." He looked at me quizzically. "Tell me one thing, though, Harry. How did you get Kelmartin to pay you off before he collected himself?"

"Well," I said, clearing my throat, "unfortunately, not everybody in this business is as trustworthy as you and me. So when Kelmartin was approached by a second prospect who offered $30,000 for the painting, he saw no reason to split the extra $10,000 with his partner. The only trouble was he couldn't collect until he delivered the painting. And I had the painting. So"—I smiled innocently—"he had to pay me off first."

"I see," Hasso said. "Only who's going to pay him $30,000 for that thing?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "nobody. His second prospect was Lovell."

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FROM A LAWYER'S ARCHIVES

a *NEW* legal-detective story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

first magazine publication in the United States

Of all the contents of a lawyer's archives this is perhaps the most curious "musty, dusty" record—the grand story of Grandmother Clatterwick and her faithful family retainer, Mr. McGuffog, and of the curious goings-on during those last years at Hambone Manor . . .

THE CURIOUS CONSPIRACY

by MICHAEL GILBERT

When I qualified as a solicitor, one of the first clients I took on was Grandmother Clatterwick. I did so with some trepidation. I was a young lawyer and she was a formidable old lady, as tough and straight as one of the whalebone inserts in her own corsets. Surprisingly we got on well together. My mother, who died in the same year as my father, had been her youngest and favorite daughter, and I think some of the affection washed off on me.

As the years went by, it became a source of sadness to me to see Grandmother's estate diminish. Not that there was any question of her sinking into poverty. Her husband, Herbert Clatterwick, had been a strange silent man who had known nothing about anything except South American mining shares; but he had understood them well enough to make a comfortable fortune on the Stock Exchange, all of which was left to his widow, along with Hambone Manor and its park. Unfortunately the money was all unearned income and as taxation bit into it more and more deeply, pieces of the park

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had to be sold, wings of the Manor shut off, and servants dismissed or not replaced.

In the end Grandmother Clatterwick lived in the south wing, attended only by the faithful McGuffog and assisted by a couple of villagers who came up by day.

McGuffog had started life at the Manor as gardener's boy, had graduated through the pantry to assistant butler, and was now butler, gardener, and handyman combined. When I went down, as I did from time to time, to talk business and stayed overnight, McGuffog would wait on the two of us, through an elaborate meal. After dinner he would bring the coffee into the drawing room, place a log on the fire, inquire whether anything else was wanted, and retire to the rooms which had been fitted out for him over the stable. There were, in fact, a dozen bedrooms he could have used in the house itself, but when the last of the resident servants left, my grandmother's sense of propriety would not allow her to sleep alone in the house with a man. She was 75 at the time.

All these thoughts and memories of my grandmother were in my mind as we sat round the desk in my office that spring morning a week after her funeral.

The aunts were all there. Aunt Gertrude, a dry and intellectual spinster; Aunt Valerie, who had married Dr. Moffat and produced two ghastly children called George and Mary; and Aunt Alexandra, who had married a Major Lumsden and bought him out of the cavalry to listen to her talk.

"*Why* did she leave no will?" said Aunt Alexandra. "You were her solicitor. It was surely your duty to see that she made one. Isn't that what lawyers are for?"

"Don't be absurd," said Aunt Gertrude. "As if anyone, let alone her own grandson, could have persuaded mother to do anything she didn't wish to do."

"Does it make any difference?" said Aunt Valerie. "As I understand the law—you must correct me if I'm wrong, dear—her money is divided into four equal shares. Not that I mind for myself. I was thinking only of George and Mary."

Aunt Gertrude cackled sardonically. It was well known in the family that Valerie excused any personal selfishness by passing it on, second-hand, to her revolting children.

I took over to prevent a fight. "That's quite correct. The property passes to the children equally, per stirpes. That—"

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"No need to explain," said Aunt Gertrude. "I haven't forgotten the Latin I learned at school"—and she shot a glance at her sisters which implied quite clearly that she suspected they had.

"How much will the estate amount to?" inquired Dr. Moffat.

"It's difficult to say. Estate duty will account for a slice of it. And the Manor will have to be sold."

"No one will give a penny for it," said Aunt Gertrude. "A rambling old place in a shocking state of repair."

"What about stocks and shares and things like that?" asked Aunt Valerie.

I said, "Granny had been using up capital quite a bit during recent years. Not so much since we bought her that annuity—that cost capital too, of course. But there must be quite a lot left. And although we may not get much for the Manor there were one or two nice things in it. It's a couple of years since I've been down there, but I remember an attributed Morland in the drawing room. That was insured for £5000. And I think there was an Etty in the dining room."

"*I* was somewhat more regular in my visits," said Dr. Moffat reprovingly.

"For George and Mary's sake," said Aunt Gertrude under her breath.

"—and I was actually there a fortnight before her decease. It struck me that she had become rather eccentric. We had a good dinner, as usual, but what do you suppose we were offered to drink with it?"

None of us could guess.

"A very large bottle of raspberry wine."

I could hardly conceal my delight. My uncle is the complete wine snob. By this I mean that he reads books about wine, belongs to all the wine societies, has a cupboard full of wine lists and the catalogues of wine auctions, talks endlessly about vintages and *crus*—and has less taste and discernment than a camel. On one occasion when we had him to dinner I emptied a bottle of red wine, which I had bought for two francs fifty at a grocer's shop in France, into an old Château Margaux bottle which I happened to have, and received the warmest commendation of my choice. "Superb bouquet, my boy. One can almost taste the violets in it." I could visualize exactly his expression when he was offered a bottle of raspberry wine.

"Apparently," said Aunt Valerie, "she had been making quite a thing of it. McGuffog,

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who had been helping her to brew it, told us that she had more than two thousand bottles of it in the cellar."

"Of raspberry wine?"

"Not all raspberry. There was raspberry, plum, and turnip wine, black currant and red currant cordial, and elder-flower champagne. And half a dozen other nauseating brews too, I don't doubt."

Major Lumsden was a silent man, as anyone would be who was married to my Aunt Alexandra, but he had a kind heart. He said, "Talking about that fellow McGuffog, are we going to do anything for him?"

"I was thinking about that," I said. "He looked after granny for more than forty years. If I could have persuaded her to make a will I'm sure she'd have left him something."

"But she didn't make a will," said Aunt Valerie sharply.

"All the same—" said the Major.

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I had a letter from McGuffog only this morning. I won't bother to read it all to you, although it's surprisingly well composed—"

"He must be reasonably competent," said Aunt Valerie. "After all, he used to manage a very large household. Larger than any of *us* have had to deal with."

"Quite so," I said. "Well, this is the passage I wanted to read you: 'I realize that Mrs. Clatterwick didn't approve of will making. She often told me so. There couldn't therefore be any question of a legacy. However—' "

As I turned the page I was aware of five pairs of eyes on me. One pair sardonic, one kindly, the other three pairs frankly greedy.

" '—it did occur to me to wonder whether the family would agree to me taking over the unused stock of homemade wine. I cooperated with Mrs. Clatterwick in getting together what must, I venture to think, be a unique collection of vintages—' "

"If *that's* all he wants," said Aunt Valerie, striving to keep the relief out of her voice, "I should be the first to agree."

The others nodded. Major Lumsden said, "Don't you think that some sort of pension—" But he was quickly and decisively overruled.

"All right," I said, "I'll tell him. He can store it in the old stable. And I assume you'll let him stay on in his flat until the house is sold?"

"If the people who buy the house have got an atom of sense," said Aunt Gertrude, "they'll take McGuffog with the house. Servants like that

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don't grow on trees."

The winding up of an intestate estate, particularly the estate of an old and secretive lady, is not a quick matter. But as the months slipped by and the answers came in from banks and stockbrokers and insurance companies, I began to feel the first stirrings of unease. There was so much less in the estate than I had expected.

It was true, as I had told her daughters, that Grandmother Clatterwick had been nibbling into capital for years. But when I finally persuaded her to put £40,000 into a life annuity, this had insured her an almost tax-free income in the high thousands—enough, one would have thought, even for a Victorian old lady who liked to double the parson's stipend and to support charities with objects as diverse as the clothing of Eskimo babies and the moral rearmament of Hottentot girls.

Moreover, when I had bought the annuity I had made a very careful check of what money and securities were left, and the total was not far short of £20,000. Now, I could locate barely half of it.

The final blow fell in the early autumn when I got the schedule of the contents of Hambone Manor. I rang up the appraiser.

I said, "Why have you left out the Morland and the Etty?"

"I left them out," said the appraiser, "because they weren't there. The old man who looks after the place—McGuffog, that's the name—told me they were put up at auction about eighteen months ago. The Morland wasn't signed, so it only fetched two thousand. The Etty went for one and a half."

It was then I decided I would have to look into the matter personally.

Hambone Street lies in the miraculously still unravaged piece of Kent to the south of the A20. It has villages which still *are* villages, which possess things like village greens on which the local cricket team plays, village halls for the Women's Institute, and not less than three public houses for a population of four hundred and fifty. Lack of a rail service has helped to keep it the way it is, and I drove down by car on a lovely autumn morning when the leaves were just beginning to turn.

I found the Manor in sad decline. The grass was uncut, the hedges were straggling, and there were unfilled potholes in the driveway. This was disappointing. The estate had continued to pay McGuffog's salary on the understanding that he did some work on the grounds.

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It looked as though he had fallen down on the job.

However, there was someone in the house. Smoke was coming from one of the chimneys and the front door was open. I found Annie, one of the two village women, in possession. She had been told to keep the house as clean and dry as possible, and I could see she, at least, was doing a good job of it. When I asked her about McGuffog she looked startled.

"Didn't they tell you?" she said. "He passed away. They should have let you know, sir."

"I'm terribly sorry," I said. "When did it happen?"

"Two weeks ago it was. They laid him to rest on Sunday. A nice service. Vicar's been very helpful too. He left no family, you see. Only a cousin, or some such, who lives over in Essex. If you'd like a word with Mr. Stacey I saw his car in the yard. Likely he'll be over there now."

I walked across to the stable and introduced myself to the Reverend Stacey, who was coming down the stairs which led to McGuffog's flat. He was a cheerful young man with the well-scrubbed face and no-nonsense look that Theological Colleges turn out nowadays. He said, "I'm glad you're here. I thought of getting in touch with you. Not that there's much for a lawyer to do. All the stuff in the flat was borrowed from the house, you know. With Mrs. Clatterwick's agreement, of course. But it belonged to her, not to McGuffog. Almost the only things he left were the clothes he stood up in. Oh, and the remains of the wine."

"The remains?"

"He seems to have got rather fond of it. Rather too fond, perhaps." The vicar gave an unclerical chuckle. "People in the village used to hear him singing. Fortunately they couldn't make out the words, so they assumed it was Gaelic."

"*Can* you get drunk on raspberry wine?"

"I expect you can get drunk on anything, if you try hard enough. McGuffog certainly put his back into it. He took over nearly two thousand bottles of it—"

"Nineteen hundred and eighty-four," said Annie who had joined us. "I helped him store them in the hayracks in the stable."

"When he died there were just about fifteen hundred left."

I did some mental arithmetic. The period between my grandmother's death and McGuffog's was not much more than twenty weeks. Call it a

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hundred and fifty days. At three bottles a day he could just have done it.

Annie said unexpectedly, "I reckon he looked on it as a duty."

We both stared at her. She blushed and then said, rather defiantly, "Well, there's no harm in me telling you. They've both gone now. But they sometimes used to share a bottle in the evenings. I know, because I came back once and saw them. There was a bottle of raspberry wine on the table and they were taking a glass each. I reckon they used to do it most evenings, when they were alone. Being homemade wine seemed to make it all right. It wasn't really *drinking*, you see."

I saw exactly what she meant. If it had been real drink it would have been an orgy. As it was elder-flower champagne or plum cordial it was simply a charming, old-fashioned ritual. I said, "I think it was a beautiful idea. You mean that McGuffog had such pleasant memories of those evenings with my grandmother that he thought it his duty to finish off the whole stock rather than let it fall into the hands of uncaring outsiders."

"Death cut him down before he could accomplish it," said the vicar. "Sad."

"Talking of outsiders, what have you done with the balance of the stuff?"

The vicar said, "The cousin from Essex suggested that we give it to the Women's Institute. They'll be selling it off at their jumble sale this afternoon. I was on my way there. Perhaps you'd like to come along."

While we were talking we had drifted into the stable—a fine old-fashioned accommodation for eight horses, with deep hayracks. Annie spotted something in the corner. She said, "There now. They've forgotten that one. It must have got hidden in the straw."

It was a claret bottle of the green-glass type used by some Bordeaux shippers for a few years after the War when supplies were scarce, but now uncommon. A label in Grandmother Clatterwick's spidery writing identified the contents as damson wine.

"Don't you think," I said, "that it would be a fitting gesture if we drank a last toast, a farewell salute to a gallant old lady?"

"An excellent idea," said the vicar, adding, "the later I arrive at that jumble sale the less I shall have to spend."

Annie fetched glasses and a corkscrew. It was while I was in the act of drawing the cork that a great many questions were posed—and a few answered.

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The first thing that struck me was that the cork was remarkably firm. Amateur bottlers do not usually manage to sink the whole of the cork into the neck of the bottle. The next was that it was an old cork, stiff with age and impregnated with the lees of the wine. Now this was really curious. Not only was the cork clearly twenty or thirty years old, but it was equally clear that it had spent those twenty or thirty years *in that bottle*.

I carried the bottle to the door to examine it more closely. Imprinted into its side was the name of one of the four finest Châteaux in the Haut-Médoc.

I went back, picked up the tumbler which Annie had filled for me, and held it up to the light.

The vicar had already tasted his. "Remarkable damsons," he said.

I gave the tumbler a twist and watched the thick dark red liquid cling to the sides of the glass and slide away. Then I tasted it—and all my suspicions became facts.

The vicar, who had put his glass down, said, "Hold on a moment. I wonder if this will help us."

He went across to his car and came back with an exercise book. "I found it in McGuffog's flat. I was going to send it on to his cousin."

I opened the book. The writing I recognized as McGuffog's. I only needed a single glance at it. "When did you say that jumble sale was due to start?"

"It's started—half an hour ago."

"Where is it being held?"

"Take you in my car. It'll be quicker than explaining."

"Thank you," I said, "and if you'll excuse the expression, padre, drive like hell."

There were half a dozen cars parked outside the Village Hall, a crowd of women, most of them with perambulators and pushcarts, and a lot of children skirmishing round the flanks. We pushed in and the vicar introduced me to a tweedy lady whose name I never got. He said, "This is Mrs. Clatterwick's grandson." I admired his tact. It was a better introduction than "her solicitor." "He's interested in his grandmother's homemade wines."

The tweedy lady beamed at me. She said, "I'd have recognized you anywhere. You've got the family nose. Yes. It was kind of McGuffog's cousin to think of us. We've been doing quite a brisk trade."

My feelings must have been apparent. The tweedy lady said, "There's a good deal left,

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though. I had them all put together over here."

On and under the long trestle-tables normally devoted to village teas stood the bottles, rank upon rank. "I had intended," I said, "to make you an offer for the lot. As a collection, you know."

"That's a nice idea," said the tweedy lady. "This gentleman is old Mrs. Clatterwick's grandson, Cynthia. He wanted to buy all the homemade wine. In memory of his grandmother. Has much of it gone already?"

Cynthia consulted a list. "Mrs. Parkin had a bottle. And Mrs. Batchelor had two. But the only other lot was Colonel Nicholson. *He* took six dozen."

I was making a rapid count of the bottles assisted by the fact that they were arranged in orderly groups of twenty-five. I said, "That's right. Fourteen hundred and twenty-five bottles—"

"They took *hours* to arrange," said Cynthia.

"What were you selling them at?"

"We had them down at sixpence a bottle," said the tweedy lady. "But we could give you a discount if you really are taking the lot."

"Far from it," I said. "A complete collection is always worth more than its individual parts." I wrote out a check for £100. "Who shall I make it out to?"

"A *hundred* pounds," said Cynthia, who had also been doing some arithmetic. "But that's nearly three times—"

"I'm sure my grandmother—and Mr. McGuffog—would have wanted it that way," I said. "I'll make all the arrangements for transporting the bottles. Please don't think of disturbing them. Leave it just as it is. If you'll excuse me a moment—"

Outside the hall I collared two intelligent-looking small boys. I said, "Would you like to earn half a crown?" The less intelligent boy nodded at once. The brighter one said, "What for?"

"One of you find Mrs. Parkin and one of you find Mrs. Batchelor—do you know them?"

The boys nodded.

"I want to buy back the bottles of homemade wine they bought here this afternoon. Here's five shillings each. See how cheaply you can buy them back—you can keep the change."

The two boys scudded off. I went to look for the vicar.

"Last lap," I said. "Can you take me to Colonel Nicholson's house?"

"Almost as quick to walk," said the vicar. "That path through the spinney there will bring you to his back lawn.

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Watch out for his dog, though. He's quite all right if you don't make any sudden movements."

I arrived at the colonel's front door followed by a Doberman pinscher. I refrained from making any sudden movements and rang the bell. It was the colonel himself who opened the door. No doubt about that. A tall man with guileless light-blue eyes and a silky white mustache. When I had introduced myself he said, "Ah, yes. Come along in. I was half expecting a visit."

He led me through into the dining room. An agreeable apartment, full of polished mahogany and sparkling glass and shining silver. One of the bottles I had come for was standing on the sideboard. The cork had been drawn and there was a glass beside it.

"I don't normally drink wine at four in the afternoon," said the colonel. "But this was by way of being an experiment."

He brought out a second glass from the cupboard and proceeded to fill them both. I was glad to see that he did this properly, tilting the bottle slowly but firmly, with no sudden movements. The Doberman pinscher would have approved.

He said, "About nine months ago—it would have been around the turn of the year—I had the pleasure of having dinner with your grandmother. It must, I suppose, have been one of the very last dinner parties she gave. We drank a *remarkable* red currant cordial. I made up my mind that I must at all costs obtain the recipe from her or from her man, McGuffog, who had, I was told, assisted her in brewing it."

His eyes twinkling frostily, the colonel picked up his glass, sniffed at it, tilted it delicately, and took a sip. I followed suit.

"Unfortunately she died before I could do so. And I did not like to intrude on McGuffog who seems to have led a somewhat hermitlike if happy existence for the last six months of his life."

"Musical, too," I said.

We drank again, and the colonel continued. "When, however, I learned that the wines were for sale I hurried down and purchased some. I fully intended, if they came up to my expectations—as, indeed this one does, let me refill your glass—to go back and make an offer for the lot."

"Too late," I said. "I've bought them for the estate."

"I feared as much."

"And I'd like to buy back the six dozen you have."

The colonel considered the matter, stroking his mustache delicately with the tip of his

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little finger. Then he said, "I'll make a deal with you. You can buy back four dozen at the price I gave for them. I'll keep two dozen as a memento—that is, if you'll tell me the whole story."

"I'm not sure I know the whole story," I said. "A lot of it will be guessing. What I *think* happened is that my grandmother and McGuffog, both rather lonely people by that time, got into the way of splitting a bottle in the evening. But in order to avoid offending my grandmother's rather strict sense of propriety, it had to be something which sounded harmless and old-fashioned."

"Like raspberry wine?"

"Exactly. Unfortunately, the only thing they both liked and appreciated were good French and German wines."

"I wouldn't call it unfortunate," said the colonel, refilling our glasses. "Was it all as good as this?"

I took the exercise book from my brief case and showed it to the colonel, who riffled through the pages.

"Glory be," he said ecstatically, "it must have cost her a fortune."

"Not a whole fortune—nine or ten thousand pounds."

"There's a page full of Private Estate bottled Trockenbeeren Auslese Hock. That must have set them back fifteen pounds a bottle. What did they call that?"

"I think that was called elder-flower champagne."

"They seem to have chosen their stuff very well. I see they avoided the '47 clarets and stuck to the '45's and '49's. Sound judgment that."

"It would be McGuffog who did the buying. He'd had a good deal of experience."

"Ah," said the colonel. "*That's* what I was looking for. Domaine de la Romanée Conti. They've got some of the Richebourg '29. Do you think that could possibly be what we're drinking now?"

" '29 or '34," I said. "This is certainly one of the finest Burgundies I've ever tasted."

The third glass of a triumphant Burgundy induces contemplation and dispenses with the necessity for small talk. As we drank in silence I reflected on the real motives behind that curious conspiracy between Grandmother Clatterwick and Mr. McGuffog. Undoubtedly they both liked good wine. And undoubtedly the relabeling of a princely claret as raspberry wine and watching my Uncle Moffat turn his nose up at it must have appealed sharply to their sense of humor.

But I felt there was more to it than that. Like most very old

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and fairly rich people my grandmother must have been conscious of her next of kin like jackals sitting round a dying lion, licking their chops and waiting to get their teeth in. As each night the log fire flickered in the grate and another great wine sank in its bottle, must there not have been a feeling akin to triumph? Another ten pounds salvaged from Gertrude, Valerie, and Alexandra. Another crust out of the mouths of little George and Mary.

A further thought occurred to me. Might this not account for the heroic efforts of McGuffog after her death? His sensibility would not, of course, have allowed him to destroy such wine, but if it could all be consumed—?

The colonel seemed to have read my thoughts.

"I'm told," he said, "that McGuffog was averaging three to four bottles a day. I suppose that's really what finished him off."

"I fear it must have been."

"What a *wonderful* way to go!"

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WOODROW WILSON'S NECKTIE

by PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

The façade of MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS glittered and throbbed with red and yellow lights, even in the daytime. Knobs of golden balls—the yellow lights—pulsated amid the red lights, attracting the eye and holding it.

Clive Wilkes loved the place, the inside and the outside equally. Since he was a delivery boy for a grocery store, it was easy for him to say that a certain delivery had taken him longer than had been expected—he'd had to wait for Mrs. So-and-so to get home because the doorman had told him she was due back any minute, or he'd had to go five blocks to find some change because Mrs. Smith had had only a twenty-dollar bill. At these spare moments—and Clive managed one or two a week—he visited MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS.

Inside the establishment you went through a dark passage—to be put in the mood—and then you were confronted by a bloody murder scene on the left: a girl with long blonde hair was sticking a knife into the neck of an old man who sat at a kitchen table eating his dinner. His dinner consisted of two wax frankfurters and wax sauerkraut. Then came the Lindbergh kidnaping scene, with Hauptmann climbing down a ladder outside a nursery window; you could see the top of the ladder out the window, and the top half of Hauptmann's

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figure, clutching the little boy. Also there was Marat in his bath with Charlotte nearby. And Christie with his stocking, throttling a woman.

Clive loved every tableau, and they never became stale. But he didn't look at them with the solemn, vaguely startled expression of the other people who looked at them. Clive was inclined to smile, even to laugh. They were amusing. So why not laugh?

Farther on in the museum were the torture chambers—one old, one modern, purporting to show Twentieth Century torture methods in Nazi Germany and in French Algeria. Madame Thibault—who Clive strongly suspected did not exist—kept up to date. There were the Kennedy assassinations and the Tate massacre, of course, and some murder that had happened only a month ago somewhere.

Clive's first definite ambition in regard to MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS museum was to spend a night there. This he did one night, providently taking along a cheese sandwich in his pocket. It was fairly easy to accomplish. Clive knew that three people worked in the museum proper—down in the bowels, as he thought of it, though the museum was on street level—while a fourth, a plumpish middle-aged man in a nautical cap, sold tickets at a booth in front. The three who worked in the bowels were two men and a woman; the woman, also plump and with curly brown hair and glasses and about 40, took the tickets at the end of the dark corridor, where the museum proper began.

One of the inside men lectured constantly, though not more than half the people ever bothered to listen. "Here we see the fanatical expression of the true murderer, captured by the supreme wax artistry of Madame Thibault"—and so on. The other inside man had black hair and black-rimmed glasses like the woman, and he just drifted around, shooing away kids who wanted to climb into the tableaux, maybe watching for pickpockets, or maybe protecting women from unpleasant assaults in the semi-darkness. Clive didn't know.

He only knew it was quite easy to slip into one of the dark corners or into a nook next to one of the Iron Molls—maybe even into one of the Iron Molls; but slender as he was, the spikes might poke into him, Clive thought, so he ruled out this idea. He had observed that people were gently urged out around 9:15 P.M., as the museum closed at 9:30 P.M.

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And lingering as late as possible one evening, Clive had learned that there was a sort of cloakroom for the staff behind a door in one back corner, from which direction he had also heard the sound of a toilet flushing.

So one night in November, Clive concealed himself in the shadows, which were abundant, and listened to the three people as they got ready to leave. The woman—whose name turned out to be Mildred—was lingering to take the money box from Fred, the ticket seller, and to count it and deposit it somewhere in the cloakroom. Clive was not interested in the money. He was interested only in spending a night in the place and being able to boast he had.

"Night, Mildred—see you tomorrow," called one of the men.

"Anything else to do? I'm leaving now," said Mildred. "Boy, am I tired! But I'm still going to watch Dragon Man tonight."

"Dragon Man," the other man repeated, uninterested.

Evidently the ticket seller, Fred, left from the front of the building after handing in the money box, and in fact Clive recalled seeing him close up the front once, cutting the lights from inside the entrance door, then locking the door and barring it on the outside.

Clive stood in a nook by an Iron Moll. When he heard the back door shut and the key turn in the lock, he waited for a moment in delicious silence, aloneness, and suspense, and then ventured out. He went first, on tiptoe, to the room where they kept their coats, because he had never seen it. He had brought matches—also cigarettes, though smoking was not allowed, according to several signs—and with the aid of a match he found the light switch. The room contained an old desk, four metal lockers, a tin wastebasket, an umbrella stand, and some books in a bookcase against a grimy wall that had once been white. Clive slid open a drawer and found the well-worn wooden box which he had once seen the ticket seller carrying in through the front door. The box was locked. He could walk out with the box, Clive thought, but he didn't care to, and he considered this rather decent of himself. He gave the box a wipe with the side of his hand, not forgetting the bottom where his fingertips had touched. That was funny, he thought, wiping something he wasn't going to steal.

Clive set about enjoying the night. He found the lights and put them on so that the booths

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with the gory tableaux were all illuminated. He was hungry, took one bite of his sandwich, then put it back in the paper napkin in his pocket. He sauntered slowly past the John F. Kennedy assassination—Mrs. Kennedy and the doctors bending anxiously over the white table on which JFK lay. This time, Hauptmann's descent of the ladder made Clive giggle. Charles Lindbergh, Jr.'s face looked so untroubled that one would think he might be sitting on the floor of his nursery, playing with blocks.

Clive swung a leg over a metal bar and climbed into the Judd-Snyder tableau. It gave him a thrill to be standing right *with* them, inches from the throttling-from-behind which the lover of the woman was administering to the husband. Clive put a hand out and touched the red-paint blood that was seeming to come from the man's throat where the cord pressed deep. Clive also touched the cool cheekbones of the victim. The popping eyes were of glass, vaguely disgusting, and Clive did not touch those.

Two hours later he was singing church hymns, *Nearer My God to Thee* and *Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam.* Clive didn't know all the words. And he smoked.

By two in the morning he was bored and tried to get out by both the front door and back, but couldn't—both were barred on the outside. He had thought of having a hamburger at an all-night diner between here and home. However, his enforced incarceration didn't bother him, so he finished the now-dry cheese sandwich and slept for a bit on three straight chairs which he arranged in a row. It was so uncomfortable that he knew he'd wake up in a while, which he did—at 5 A.M. He washed his face, then went for another look at the wax exhibits. This time he took a souvenir—Woodrow Wilson's necktie.

As the hour of 9:00 approached—MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS opened at 9:30 A.M.—Clive hid himself in an excellent spot, behind one of the tableaux whose backdrop was a black-and-gold Chinese screen. In front of the screen was a bed and in the bed lay a wax man with a handlebar mustache, who was supposed to have been poisoned by his wife.

The public began to trickle in shortly after 9:30 A.M., and the taller, more solemn man began to mumble his boring lecture. Clive had to wait till a few minutes past ten before he felt safe enough to mingle with the crowd and make his exit,

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with Woodrow Wilson's necktie rolled up in his pocket. He was a bit tired, but happy—though on second thought, who would he tell about it? Joey Vrasky, that dumb cluck who worked behind the counter at Simmons' Grocery? Hah! Why bother? Joey didn't deserve a good story. Clive was half an hour late for work.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Simmons, I overslept," Clive said hastily, but he thought quite politely, as he came into the store. There was a delivery job awaiting him. Clive took his bicycle and put the carton on a platform in front of the handlebars.

Clive lived with his mother, a thin highly strung woman who was a saleswoman in a shop that sold stockings, girdles, and underwear. Her husband had left her when Clive was nine. She had no other children. Clive had quit high school a year before graduation, to his mother's regret, and for a year he had done nothing but lie around the house or stand on street corners with his pals. But Clive had never been very chummy with any of them, for which his mother was thankful, as she considered them a worthless lot. Clive had had the delivery job at Simmons' for nearly a year now, and his mother felt that he was settling down.

When Clive came home that evening at 6:30 P.M. he had a story ready for his mother. Last night he had run into his old friend Richie, who was in the Army and home on leave, and they had sat up at Richie's house talking so late that Richie's parents had invited him to stay over, and Clive had slept on the couch. His mother accepted this explanation. She made a supper of baked beans, bacon, and eggs.

There was really no one to whom Clive felt like telling his exploit of the night. He couldn't have borne someone looking at him and saying, "Yeah? So what?" because what he had done had taken a bit of planning, even a little daring. He put Woodrow Wilson's tie among his others that hung over a string on the inside of his closet door. It was a gray silk tie, conservative and expensive-looking. Several times that day Clive imagined one of the two men in the museum, or maybe the woman named Mildred, glancing at Woodrow Wilson and exclaiming, "Hey! What happened to Woodrow Wilson's tie, I wonder?"

Each time Clive thought of this he had to duck his head to hide a smile.

After twenty-four hours, however, the exploit had begun to lose its charm and excite-

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ment. Clive's excitement only rose again—and it could rise two or three times a day—whenever he cycled past the twinkling façade of MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS. His heart would give a leap, his blood would run a little faster, and he would think of all the motionless murders going on in there, and all the stupid faces of Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Q. Public gaping at them. But Clive didn't even buy another ticket—price 65 cents—to go in and look at Woodrow Wilson and see that his tie was missing and his collar button showing—his work.

Clive did get another idea one afternoon, a hilarious idea that would make the public sit up and take notice. Clive's ribs trembled with suppressed laughter as he pedaled toward Simmons', having just delivered a bag of groceries.

When should he do it? Tonight? No, best to take a day or so to plan it. It would take brains. And silence. And sure movements—all the things Clive admired.

He spent two days thinking about it. He went to his local snack bar and drank beer and played the pinball machines with his pals. The pinball machines had pulsating lights too—*More Than One Can Play* and *It's More Fun To Compete*—but Clive thought only of MADAME THIBAULT'S as he stared at the rolling, bouncing balls that mounted a score he cared nothing about. It was the same when he looked at the rainbow-colored jukebox whose blues, reds, and yellows undulated, and when he went over to drop a coin in it. He was thinking of what he was going to do in MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS.

On the second night, after a supper with his mother, Clive went to MADAME THIBAULT'S and bought a ticket. The old guy who sold tickets barely looked at people, he was so busy making change and tearing off the stubs, which was just as well. Clive went in at 9:00 P.M.

He looked at the tableaux, though they were not so fascinating to him tonight as they had been before. Woodrow Wilson's tie was still missing, as if no one had noticed it, and Clive chuckled over this. He remembered that the solemn-faced pickpocket-watcher—the drifting snoop—had been the last to leave the night Clive had stayed, so Clive assumed he had the keys, and therefore he ought to be the last to be killed.

The woman was the first. Clive hid himself beside one of the Iron Molls again, while the

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crowd ambled out, and when Mildred walked by him, in her hat and coat, to leave by the back door, having just said something to one of the men in the exhibition hall, Clive stepped out and wrapped an arm around her throat from behind.

She made only a small *ur-rk* sound.

Clive squeezed her throat with his hands, stopping her voice. At last she slumped, and Clive dragged her into a dark, recessed corner to the left of the cloakroom. He knocked an empty cardboard box of some kind over, but it didn't make enough noise to attract the attention of the two men.

"Mildred's gone?" one of the men asked.

"I think she's in the office."

"No, she's not." The owner of this voice had already gone into the corridor where Clive crouched over Mildred and had looked into the empty cloakroom where the light was still on. "She's left. Well, I'm calling it a day too."

Clive stepped out then and encircled this man's neck in the same manner. The job was more difficult, because the man struggled, but Clive's arm was thin and strong; he acted with swiftness and knocked the man's head against the wooden floor.

"What's going on?" The thump had brought the second man.

This time Clive tried a punch to the man's jaw, but missed and hit his neck. However, this so stunned the man—the little solemn fellow, the snoop—that a quick second blow was easy, and then Clive was able to take him by the shirtfront and bash his head against the plaster wall which was harder than the wooden floor. Then Clive made sure that all three were dead. The two men's heads were bloody. The woman was bleeding slightly from her mouth. Clive reached for the keys in the second man's pockets. They were in his left trousers pocket and with them was a penknife. Clive also took the knife.

Then the taller man moved slightly. Alarmed, Clive opened the pearl-handled penknife and plunged it into the man's throat three times.

Close call, Clive thought, as he checked again to make sure they were all dead. They most certainly were, and that was most certainly real blood, not the red paint of MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS. Clive switched on the lights for the tableaux and went into the exhibition hall for the interesting task of choosing exactly the right places for the three corpses.

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The woman belonged in Marat's bath—not much doubt about that. Clive debated removing her clothing, but decided against it, simply because she would look much funnier sitting in a bath wearing a fur-trimmed coat and hat. The figure of Marat sent him off into laughter. He'd expected sticks for legs, and nothing between the legs, because you couldn't see any more of Marat than from the middle of his torso up; but Marat had no legs at all and his wax body ended just below the waist in a fat stump which was planted on a wooden platform so that it would not topple. This crazy waxwork Clive carried into the cloakroom and placed squarely in the middle of the desk. He then carried the woman—who weighed a good deal—onto the Marat scene and put her in the bath. Her hat fell off, and he pushed it on again, a bit over one eye. Her bloody mouth hung open.

Good lord, it *was* funny!

Now for the men. Obviously, the one whose throat he had knifed would look good in the place of the old man who was eating wax franks and sauerkraut, because the girl behind him was supposed to be stabbing him in the throat. This took Clive some fifteen minutes. Since the figure of the old man was in a seated position, Clive put him on the toilet off the cloakroom. It was terribly amusing to see the old man seated on the toilet, throat apparently bleeding, a knife in one hand and a fork in the other. Clive lurched against the door jamb, laughing loudly, not even caring if someone heard him, because it was so comical it was even worth getting caught for.

Next, the little snoop. Clive looked around him and his eye fell on the Woodrow Wilson scene which depicted the signing of the armistice in 1918. A wax figure sat at a huge desk signing something, and that was the logical place for a man whose head was almost split open. With some difficulty Clive got the pen out of the wax man's fingers, laid it to one side on the desk, and carried the figure—it didn't weigh much—into the cloakroom, where Clive seated him at the desk, rigid arms in an attitude of writing. Clive stuck a ballpoint pen into his right hand. Now for the last heave. Clive saw that his jacket was now quite spotted with blood and he would have to get rid of it, but so far there was no blood on his trousers.

Clive dragged the second man to the Woodrow Wilson tableau, lifted him up, and

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rolled him toward the desk. He got him onto the chair, but the head toppled forward onto the green-blottered desk, onto the blank wax pages, and the pen barely stood upright in the limp hand.

But it was done. Clive stood back and smiled. Then he listened. He sat down on a straight chair and rested for a few minutes, because his heart was beating fast and he suddenly realized that every muscle in his body was tired. Ah, well, he now had the keys. He could lock up, go home, and have a good night's rest, because he wanted to be ready to enjoy tomorrow.

Clive took a sweater from one of the male figures in a log-cabin tableau of some kind. He had to pull the sweater down over the feet of the waxwork to get it off, because the arms would not bend; it stretched the neck of the sweater, but he couldn't help that. Now the wax figure had a sort of bib for a shirtfront, and naked arms and chest.

Clive wadded up his jacket and went everywhere with it, erasing fingerprints from whatever he thought he had touched. He turned the lights off, made his way carefully to the back door, locked and barred it behind him, and would have left the keys in a mailbox if there had been one; but there wasn't, so he dropped the keys on the rear doorstep. In a wire rubbish basket he found some newspapers; he wrapped up his jacket in them and walked on with it until he found another wire rubbish basket, where he forced the bundle down among candy wrappers, beer cans, and other trash.

"A new sweater?" his mother asked that night.

"Richie gave it to me—for luck."

Clive slept like the dead, too tired even to laugh again at the memory of the old man sitting on the toilet.

The next morning Clive was standing across the street when the ticketseller arrived just before 9:30 A.M. By 9:35 A.M. only four people had gone in; but Clive could not wait any longer, so he crossed the street and bought a ticket. Now the ticketseller was doubling as tickettaker, and telling people, "Just go on in. Everybody's late this morning."

The ticket man stepped inside the door to put on some lights, then walked all the way into the place to put on the display lights for the tableaux, which worked from switches in the hall that led to the cloakroom. And the funny thing, to Clive who was walking

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behind him, was that the ticket man didn't notice anything odd, didn't even notice Mildred in her hat and coat sitting in Marat's bathtub.

The other customers so far were a man and a woman, a boy of fourteen or so in sneakers, alone apparently, and a single man. They looked expressionlessly at Mildred in the tub as if they thought it quite "normal," which would have sent Clive into paroxysms of mirth, except that his heart was thumping madly and he could hardly breathe for the suspense. Also, the man with his face in franks and sauerkraut brought no surprise either. Clive was a bit disappointed.

Two more people came in, a man and a woman.

Then at last, in front of the Woodrow Wilson tableau, there was a reaction. One of the women, clinging to her husband's arm, asked, "Was someone shot when the armistice was signed?"

"I don't know. I don't *think* so," the man replied vaguely.

Clive's laughter pressed like an explosion in his chest; he spun on his heel to control himself, and he had the feeling he knew *all* about history, and that no one else did. By now, of course, the real blood had turned to a rust color. The green blotter was now splotched, and blood had dripped down the side of the desk.

A woman on the other side of the room, where Mildred was, let out a scream.

A man laughed, but only briefly.

Suddenly everything happened. A woman shrieked, and at the same time a man yelled, "My God, it's *real!*"

Clive saw a man climbing up to investigate the corpse with his face in the frankfurters.

"The blood's *real!* It's a *dead* man!"

Another man—one of the public—slumped to the floor. He had fainted.

The ticket seller came bustling in. "What's the trouble here?"

"Coupla corpses—*real* ones!"

Now the ticket seller looked at Marat's bathtub and fairly jumped into the air with surprise. "Holy Christmas! *Holy* cripes!—it's *Mildred*!"

"And this one!"

"And the one here!"

"My God, got to—got to call the police!" said the ticket seller.

One man and woman left hurriedly. But the rest lingered, shocked, fascinated.

The ticket seller had run into the cloakroom, where the telephone was, and Clive heard him yell something. He'd seen the man at the desk, of course,

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the wax man, and the half body of Marat on the desk.

Clive thought it was time to drift out, so he did, sidling his way through a group of people peering in the front door, perhaps intending to come in because there was no ticket seller.

That was good, Clive thought. That was all right. Not bad. Not bad at all.

He had not intended to go to work that day, but suddenly he thought it wiser to check in and ask for the day off. Mr. Simmons was of course as sour as ever when Clive said he was not feeling well, but as Clive held his stomach and appeared weak, there was little old Simmons could do. Clive left the grocery. He had brought with him all his ready cash, about $23.

Clive wanted to take a long bus ride somewhere. He realized that suspicion might fall on him, if the ticket seller remembered his coming to MADAME THIBAULT'S often, or especially if he remembered Clive being there last night; but this really had little to do with his desire to take a bus ride. His longing for a bus ride was simply, somehow, irresistible. He bought a ticket westward for $8 and change, one way. This brought him, by about 7:00 P.M., to a good-sized town in Indiana, whose name Clive paid no attention to.

The bus spilled a few passengers, Clive included, at a terminal, where there was a cafeteria and a bar. By now Clive was curious about the newspapers, so he went to the newsstand near the street door of the cafeteria. And there were the headlines:

Triple Murder in Waxworks
Mass Murder in Museum
Mystery Killer Strikes:
Three Dead in Waxworks

Clive liked the last one best. He bought the three newspapers, and stood at the bar with a beer.

"This morning at 9:30 A.M., ticket-man Fred J. Carmody and several of the public who had come to see Madame Thibault's Waxwork Horrors, a noted attraction of this city, were confronted by three genuine corpses among the displays. They were the bodies of Mrs. Mildred Veery, 41; George P. Hartley, 43; and Richard K. McFadden, 37, all employed at the waxworks museum. The two men were killed by concussion and stabbing, and the woman by strangulation. Police are searching for clues on the premises. The murders are believed to have taken place shortly before 10:00 P.M. last evening, when the three employees were about

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to leave the museum. The murderer or murderers may have been among the last patrons of the museum before closing time at 9:30 P.M. It is thought that he or they may have concealed themselves somewhere in the museum until the rest of the patrons had left . . ."

Clive was pleased. He smiled as he sipped his beer. He hunched over the papers, as if he did not wish the rest of the world to share his pleasure, but this was not true. After a few minutes Clive stood up and looked to the right and left to see if anyone else among the men and women at the bar was also reading the story. Two men were reading newspapers, but Clive could not tell if they were reading about him, because their newspapers were folded.

Clive lit a cigarette and went through all three newspapers to see if any clue to him was mentioned. He found nothing. One paper said specifically that Fred J. Carmody had not noticed any person or persons entering the museum last evening who looked suspicious.

". . . Because of the bizarre arrangement of the victims and of the displaced wax figures in the exhibition, in whose places the victims were put, police are looking for a psychopathic killer. Residents of the area have been warned by radio and television to take special precautions on the streets and to keep their houses locked."

Clive chuckled over that one. Psychopathic killer! He was sorry about the lack of detail, the lack of humor in the three reporters' stories. They might have said something about the old guy sitting on the toilet. Or the fellow signing the armistice with the back of his head bashed in. Those were strokes of genius. Why didn't they appreciate them?

When he had finished his beer, Clive walked out onto the sidewalk. It was now dark and the streetlights were on. He enjoyed looking around in the new town, looking into shop windows. But he was aiming for a hamburger place, and he went into the first one he came to. It was a diner made up to look like a crack railway car.

Clive ordered a hamburger and a cup of coffee. Next to him were two Western-looking men in cowboy boots and rather soiled broad-brimmed hats. Was one a sheriff, Clive wondered? But they were talking, in a drawl, about acreage somewhere. Land. They were hunched over hamburgers and coffee, one so close that his elbow kept touching Clive's. Clive was reading his newspapers all over again and he had

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propped one against the napkin container in front of him.

One of the men asked for a napkin and disturbed Clive, but Clive smiled and said in a friendly way, "Did you read about the murders in the waxworks?"

The man looked blank for a moment, then said, "Yep, saw the headlines."

"Someone killed the three people who worked in the place. Look." There was a photograph in one of the papers, but Clive didn't much like it because it showed the corpses lined up on the floor. He would have preferred Mildred in the bathtub.

"Yeah," said the Westerner, edging away from Clive as if he didn't like him.

"The bodies were put into a few of the exhibits. Like the wax figures. They say that, but they don't show a picture of it," said Clive.

"Yeah," said the Westerner, and went on eating.

Clive felt let down and somehow insulted. His face grew a little warm as he stared back at his newspapers. In fact, anger was growing quickly inside him, making his heart go faster, as it always did when he passed MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS, though now the sensation was not at all pleasant.

Clive put on a smile, however, and turned to the man on his left again. "I mention it, because I did it. That's my work there." He gestured toward the picture of the corpses.

"Listen, boy," said the Westerner casually, "you just keep to yourself tonight. Okay? We ain't botherin' you, so don't you go botherin' us." He laughed a little, glancing at his companion.

His friend was staring at Clive, but looked away at once when Clive stared back.

This was a double rebuff, and quite enough for Clive. He got out his money and paid for his unfinished food with a dollar bill. He left the change and walked to the sliding-door exit.

"But y'know, maybe that guy ain't kiddin'," Clive heard one of the men say.

Clive turned and said, "I *ain't* kiddin'!" Then he went out into the night.

Clive slept at a Y.M.C.A. The next day he half expected he would be picked up by a passing cop on the beat, but he wasn't. He got a lift to another town, nearer his hometown. The day's newspapers brought no mention of his name, and no mention of clues. In another café that evening, almost the identical conversation took

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place between Clive and a couple of fellows his own age. They didn't believe him. It was stupid of them, Clive thought, and he wondered if they were pretending? Or lying?

Clive hitched his way home and headed for the police station. He was curious as to what *they* would say. He imagined what his mother would say after he confessed. Probably the same thing she had said to her friends sometimes, or that she'd said to a policeman when he was sixteen and had stolen a car.

"Clive hasn't been the same since his father went away. I know he needs a man around the house, a man to look up to, imitate, you know. That's what people tell me. Since he was fourteen Clive's been asking me questions like, 'Who am I, anyway?' and 'Am I a person, mom?'" Clive could see and hear her in the police station.

"I have an important confession to make," Clive said to a deskman in the front.

The man's attitude was rude and suspicious, Clive thought, but he was told to walk to an office, where he spoke with a police officer who had gray hair and a fat face. Clive told his story.

"Where do you go to school, Clive?"

"I don't. I'm eighteen." Clive told him abou[illegible] Simmons' Grocery.

"Clive, you've got [illegible]es, but they're not the ones you're talking about," said the officer.

Clive had to wait in a room, and nearly an hour later a psychiatrist was brought in. Then his mother. Clive became more and more impatient. They didn't believe him. They were saying his was a typical case of false confession in order to draw attention to himself. His mother's repeated statements about his asking questions like "Am I a person?" and "Who am I?" only seemed to corroborate the opinions of the psychiatrist and the police.

Clive was to report somewhere twice a week for psychiatric therapy.

He fumed. He refused to go back to Simmons' Grocery, but found another delivery job, because he liked having a little money in his pocket, and he was fast on his bicycle and honest with the change.

"You haven't *found* the murderer, have you?" Clive said to the police psychiatrist. "You're all the biggest bunch of jackasses I've ever seen in my life!"

The psychiatrist said soothingly, "You'll never get anywhere talking to people like that, boy."

Clive said, "Some perfectly

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ordinary strangers in Indiana said, 'Maybe that guy ain't kidding.' They had more sense than *you!*"

The psychiatrist smiled.

Clive smoldered. One thing might have helped to prove his story—Woodrow Wilson's necktie, which still hung in his closet. But these dumb clucks damned well didn't deserve to see that tie. Even as he ate his suppers with his mother, went to the movies, and delivered groceries, he was planning. He'd do something more important next time—like starting a fire in the depths of a big building or planting a bomb somewhere or taking a machinegun up to some penthouse and letting 'em have it down on the street. Kill a hundred people at least, or a thousand. They'd have to come up in the building to get him. *Then* they'd know. *Then* they'd treat him like somebody who really existed, like somebody who deserved an exhibit of himself in MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS.

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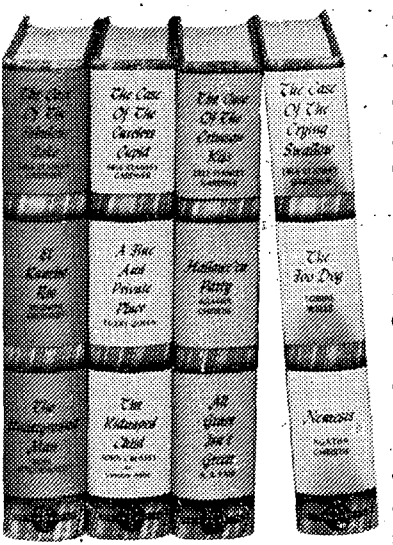

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